

A BAND of 40 robbers, welding sophisticated guns, Ayes bloodshot, went to a market in Ikeja last week. At the time they left, two policemen lay dead. A security guard also fell. Many other guards in the market sustained injuries.

Armed robbers are regaining their brazen wickedness in the commercial capital of Nigeria to kill, maim and rape women before taking their cash and valuables. The clock has turned full circle again and the citizens are not sleeping.

Then a lull came as the Lagos State Police Command took the war to the bandits arresting many and killing others in different confrontations across the state.

That lull now appears over as going by events of the past few days, armed robbery is once again on the rise and fear has gripped Lagosians. The old fears are back.

Armed robbers are now laying regular siege to almost all parts of the state, robbing both residential homes and corporate organisations.

It has become so regular that the variation may be where they strike: Whether banks, churches, warehouses, shops or even hospitals - where they cart away cash and other valuables.

Not even the heavy presence of the security agents has discouraged the daredevil gangsters as they often make such policemen their targets.

Last Sunday, there were tales of woe, as armed robbers shifted their attack to the Computer Village in Ikeja area of Lagos, robbing shops, carting away millions of naira in cash as well as handsets and other phone accessories. Two policemen were allegedly killed in the exchange of fire.

The heavy gunfire threw the whole neighbourhood into pandemonium.

A source at the Computer Village said a gang of no fewer than 40 robbers arrived at the market at about 1.00 a.m. when all the traders had retired to their homes. The robbers operated till about 4.00 a.m.

According to the trader who asked not to be named, the robbers came with sophisticated weapons.

"They overpowered the security men and broke into shops. They took about N6.5 million from a shop and N5 million from another.

"Cartons of handsets and phone accessories were also stolen", he said.

The gang, which came with weapons far superior to what the police had, was said to have battered and rid-

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dled the police armoured personnel carrier with bullets.

While the wickedness of the armed robbers had never been in doubt, the extension of their terror to the hospitals has added a new dimension to it all.

Last week, the robbers attacked Isolo General Hospital and made away with some undisclosed amount of money.

The Medical Director of the Hospital, Dr. Kunle Ogunlana, told *The Guardian* that the robbers gained access into the hospital premises through the fence.

"I learnt they scaled through a fence into the hospital compound.

"They tied the guard at the gate to a tree and-taped his mouth.

"A husband who brought his wife for treatment was battered. They tied him up with his shirt before starting their operation," he said.

According to Ogunlana, the robbers who gained entry into four sections, comprising Medical Director's office, Accounts Section, Information Office and General Consulting Room, made away with an undisclosed amount.

Fortunately, he said, they got nothing to steal in his office.

"But they broke the safe in the Accounts Section and made away with the day's receipts.

"Other departments they entered were Information Office and General Consulting Room", he added.

Ogunlana bemoaned the new wave of robbery attack on hospitals, saying they may worsen cases of patients if they were to go into the wards".

Armed robbers last week also raided Igando General Hospital.

They were reported to have broken into the Pharmacy and Accounts Sections of the hospital opened a few months ago.

There is even greater cause for worry at the rate the robbers ambush and kill policemen nation-wide.

Reason: Many policemen with little or no equipment are working under fear and as such, they take precautions before responding to distress calls. The police are themselves hamstrung.

In Lagos, based on situation reports, the state police

command lost no fewer than 30 of its men to armed robbers between November 2006 and last month.

Last weekend, two young police officers on patrol of the GSM Village, were shot dead by a gang of armed robbers who attacked the phone market at about midnight.

Sources said the policemen were taken unaware.

The robbers arrived the market in different cars pretending to be businessmen who had brought goods to deliver. Before the policemen could ascertain their mission, they released volleys of bullets and killed them instantly.

The gunshots attracted other security guards to the scene.

One of the guards was also shot dead and many others wounded.

The robbers had a field day and stole over N11 million cash mostly from two big shops and electronics and phone accessories from many shops.

The robbers struck a day before the former Police Commissioner, Mr. Udom Ekpo Udom, resumed duty in the state. Udom was moved out again to Benue State last weekend.

The new police boss, in an interview with journalists, however vowed to check and reduce the high rate of armed banditry in the state.

To achieve this, within two days of his assumption, he decided to hold a special lecture attended by officers and rank and file of the force.

Security reports hinted that policemen are vulnerable to armed attack as robbers see policemen as enemy, which makes them a first target.

But colleagues of fallen policemen seem to apportion some blame on them. According to security reports, some of the killed policemen might just have been careless.

"Imagine a policeman who goes drinking while at the duty post."

This, according to a senior officer, is dangerous, as the concerned policeman can not have 100 per cent sharp reflex action in a time of emergency.

Another senior officer said the job was becoming more tasking, considering the fact that policemen were yet to be well kited and government continues to neglect the issue of welfare.

But a retired senior police officer says the police prob-

lem is different. As he explained over the weekend, the police are losing the war with armed robbers because of a rash policy in the 1980s that has not been reversed till today.

He said that during the second Republic at Balogun area of Lagos Island, Lagos, a constable shot to death a prominent indigene and politician. Following that, the Police High Command ordered corporals and above only should bear guns.

He said that since then, police colleges do not include gun handling and shooting practice in the training curriculum of policemen. The recruits are merely taught theories without practice until the constables are promoted corporals.

"Even some corporals have never handled a gun. How, then, do you expect a corporal who had never handled a gun but called during a distress to face well-armed robbers to do well? The Police Force is no more the police we had 30 years back", he said.

At different occasions however, the Police High Command has consistently assured Nigerians that they would do everything to ensure safety of lives and property.

Police spokesperson Superintendent Olubode Ojajuni confirmed the directive on gun handling by constables but refuted the notion that recruits at Police Colleges are not taught gun handling. "Police constables receive training on gun use at the Police Training Colleges only for practical experience. But the High Command gave the directive that Police in the Constable rank should not be allowed to carry guns until they acquire enough experience".

On drinking on duty, Ojajuni said: "Policemen are not allowed to drink while on duty but they can relax after work".

Meanwhile, the new Police Commissioner, Mr. Bashiru Azeez assumed duty last Saturday.

Azeez, who addressed senior police officers yesterday, vowed to tackle crime in the state.

"I will overhaul the crime-fighting strategy," he said. The new police boss who hails from Oyo State enlisted into the Force in 1975 as a Cadet.

He was a former Commissioner of Police in Cross River, Ekiti and Borno states.

Until his new posting, he was the Commissioner of 'F' Department, Force Headquarters, Abuja.