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 THE GUARDIAN

Fresh fighting claims nine lives in Benue-Taraba boundary

From Simeon Nwakaudu, Makurdi

FRESH fighting along the Benue-Taraba boundary in the Katsina-Ala/Takum area at the weekend claimed nine lives as a bus travelling from Takum to the western part of the country was caught in cross-fire along Dogon Gawa town.

The inter-boundary clash, which has been on in the last five weeks, has defied all attempts by the governments of Benue and Taraba states to restore peace to the disputed area. As such, the border communities, stretching from Kwaghaondo Village in Benue State to Takum in Taraba State have been completely deserted, with almost all houses in these communities razed down by imported militiamen.

The Guardian gathered from an eyewitness that the Toyota Hiace bus, which left a town in Taraba State was conveying youths to a state in the western part of the country, when it ran into an ambush by some militiamen after it had passed the security check-points between Benue and Taraba states. The militiamen reportedly opened fire on the bus, killing nine persons in the process, while the remaining occupants of the bus escaped, some with bullet wounds.

After the ambush last Thursday, fighters from Kuteb in Taraba State staged reprisal attacks on the few surviving Tiv communities along the border line. However, the result of the reprisal attacks are yet to be known as inhabitants of the communities who fled the fighting zone have taken refuge among their kinsmen in Katsina Ala town, some 30 kilometres from the fighting zone.

It was learnt that mass movement from the Benue, Taraba border is now the order, since the alleged killing of two men with military uniform during a shoot-out between the militiamen, two weeks ago. Though the identity of the two slain men is yet to be ascertained, the residents have taken flight because of the ugly experience of the Tiv people following the same circumstances about the same time in 2001.

On Saturday, a high-powered meeting to check the escalating crisis was held in Katsina Ala, by the traditional council and political leaders aimed at making peace among the warring parties.

The border fighting between the Tiv of Benue State and the Kuteb of Taraba State was first brought to public knowledge through a motion moved by the member representing Katsina Ala East Constituency at the Benue State House of Assembly, Mr. Jonathan Lahave. Speaker of the House, Mr. Terseer Tsumba, ruling on that motion, called on the State Police Command to wade into the crisis, with a view to restoring peace among the warring communities.

Contacted on last weekend's killings, Public Relations Officer of Benue State Police Command, Mr. Samuel Jinadu, said he was yet to receive full briefing on the nature of the renewed fighting. He said the command would release details to the press as soon as briefings were available.

Commenting on the border crisis, former Lagos State Police Commissioner, Abubakar Tsav, appealed to the Benue State government to invite the military to patrol their own side of the boundary to avoid the ugly consequences of 2001. He also called on the state government and Tiv leaders to speak to their communities against getting involved in land crises too often.

A Tiv community leader in Kwaghaondo Village, Mr. Edward Kwaghaondo, appealed to the Benue State and Federal Governments to wade into the crisis to check further loss of lives in the crisis-prone area. He called on the Benue/Taraba governments to convene a peace meeting to resolve the issues that led to the crisis.

Since renewed fighting started along the Benue-Taraba boundary five weeks ago, no fewer than 20 persons have lost their lives, while over five villages on both sides have been sacked by militiamen operating in the zone.

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