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Police, traders differ on death toll in Onitsha mayhem

From Chuks Collins, Awka

OFFICIALS of the Anambra State government have accused some federal employees in the state of contributing to last weekend's clash between some soldiers and traders at the Niger Bridge head market.

There were speculations yesterday that the Federal Government had waded into the crisis, which led to the death of two persons.

Although the police said two people died in the mayhem, the traders put the death toll at six.

The state Police Commissioner, Oliver Osuchukwu, has however blamed "hoodlums" for the violence that characterised the relocation of traders at the Niger Bridge head market.

Sources said that two federal officials whose comments allegedly escalated the crisis had been queried by the Transportation Minister, Mrs. Diezani Ali-Madueke, who is expected in Onitsha today.

One of the officers reportedly queried by the minister, who is the new Federal Controller of Works in Anambra, allegedly issued a statement on the relevant section of the Enugu-Onitsha-Asaba dual carriage way which had for long been converted into a market.

Osuchukwu told The Guardian yesterday that two people lost their lives while three others were injured when some of the traders and hoodlums allegedly confronted soldiers drafted to the area to



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maintain peace.

"The hoodlums allegedly tried to dispossess the soldiers of their guns and you know that no soldier can take that from anyone," he said.

But the traders claimed that six people were killed while protesting their ejection by the state government.

They told reporters that they had rejected as unsuitable the two alternative locations being developed for them by the state.

When officials of the state Ministry of Environment came at the weekend to clear the area, the traders allegedly attacked them, injuring some and damaging their vehicles and equipment.

A distress call to the soldiers on security patrol did not deter the restive traders, who were allegedly infiltrated by hoodlums.

According to the state Commissioner for Environment, Ifedi Okwenna, the traders became very daring and recalcitrant, apparently instigated by the recent "unfortunate statement credited to the new Federal Controller of Works that the traders were tenants of the Federal Government."

The traders blocked the highway to prevent vehicular movement in and out of the state, thereby creating a chaotic situation. It was in an attempt to restore order and normalcy to the area by the soldiers that they were allegedly molested by the traders. In the ensuing melee, casualties were recorded.

One of the victims, simply identified as Hassan, was reportedly buried yesterday in Asaba, Delta State shortly an emissary from the Kano State government arrived in Onitsha

Okwenna, who addressed reporters alongside Chief Press Secretary, Mike Udah and Commissioner for Information and Culture, Stella Okunna, blamed the Controller "for issuing inflammatory statement to the press on the delicate matter. The traders had been co-operating since we moved into the place in October 2007 after a series of meetings."

He added: "It was his remarks in the media that instigated the traders who instantly became combative and destroyed all the structures we had put up in reclaiming and beautifying the place.

"From then on, they refused to attend all our meetings. It was at one of the meetings that they

came with their lawyer, brandishing a letter purportedly written to them by the Federal Government, which they claimed authorised their tenancy on the land."

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