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Friday, April 18, 2008

Kinsmen at war over land

From Simeon Nwakaudu, Makurdi

FOR two unbroken weeks, the boundary between Gwer Local Council and Konshisha Local Council both in Benue State has been a war zone.

At the last count on Monday, over 20 persons had lost their lives in a boundary dispute between brothers.

The land crisis between the Mbalan in Gwer, and their Kendev, Konshisha neighbours started small as a quarrel, a spark between two families over a piece of land.

The same spark became a fire, then a conflagration that has shocked the Benue State government on account of the huge losses arising from the conflict.

Local sources told The Guardian some residents of Kendev had approached their Mbalan neighbours many decades ago for land to engage in farming.

According to the source: "The land was given, but with the proviso that the Kendev people must not bury their dead on the land.

"Years passed and the agreement was maintained without friction. The dead among the Kendev were taken down to their ancestral village for burial.

"However, as the years wore on, minor land disagreements between individuals began to develop over pieces of land, hitherto taken for granted by both communities."

The worst happened two weeks ago.

The fighting was said to have started one Friday night, a little more than two weeks ago, when armed men from Kendev village invaded Mbalan, burning down houses and

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economic trees.

The next morning, when the dust had settled, it was discovered by the Mbalan people that two persons had lost their lives, both of them women.

An elder from Mbalan, Teryima Girgir, told The Guardian at Aliade, Gwer Local Council headquarters, that the invaders came with sophisticated weapons that put the policemen posted to the area to flight, leaving the Mbalan people at the mercy of the attackers.

According to him: "We were taken unawares because of the instructions we received from our council chairman and traditional rulers to lay down our arms on the ground that the matter has been resolved.

The meeting during which the local council authorities claimed they were in touch with the Konshisha people, made us drop our guard. It gave our neighbours the advantage to take us by surprise and kill us".

He appealed to governor, Gabriel Suswam to call the Konshisha people to order to avoid a dangerous escalation of the crisis, which would do no one any good in Benue State.

Girgir said: "When we begin to fight again, we shall no longer listen to pleas from any quarters. It is in the interest of everyone for this matter to be settled amicably at this point."

Council Chairman of Gwer, Mr. Simon Iwar, confirmed the fresh attack on Mbalan village. He, however, said that he was yet to get the facts straight on the casualties involved in the weekend's attacks.

He denied allegations that he played a major role in the fuelling of the crisis as the Gwer Council chairman.

He said: "I am a man of peace and that is what I have been working hard to restore since the crisis. I have worked hard to get mobile policemen to patrol the area and I have been meeting with leaders of my area to stop the crisis. It is false and the work of mischief-makers that I was involved in fuelling the crisis. I would have no benefits in any crises in my council."

"I want to use this opportunity to plead with Konshisha people not to entertain fears of any attacks again. We have been able to contain the fighters on our part. They should endeavour to do same on their own side as instructed by the state governor. No development can take place in an atmosphere of violence", Iwar said.

The Benue State Police Command Public Relations Officer, Mr. Samuel Jinadu told The Guardian he was yet to receive any briefing on the recent happenings in the area.

He, however, said a meeting had been held between the warring communities and the Police Commissioner, Ibiyinka Kayode, at which the leaders had assured the police boss that hostilities would cease in the disputed area.

The chairmen of the two warring local councils areas, it has been discovered, found it extremely difficult to call the fighters to order.

Indeed, the fighters were said to be mercenaries armed with AK47 rifles who had no scruples whatsoever.

After the first round of fighting, everything appeared to have returned to normal, until last weekend.

On Friday evening, militiamen attacked Mbalan village in Gwer, leaving in their trail blood and tears.

About four persons were killed, over seventy homes razed, while farms and economic trees were set ablaze.

On Monday, fighters from Mbalan village and other neighbouring villages supporting them had been sufficiently mobilized to stage a bloody reprisal attacks on Kendev village.

Six students of the College of Education, Oju returning home after their semester break were murdered in cold blood along the Oju-Awajir road.

The bus they were travelling in ran into a roadblock mounted by militiamen from Mbalan community. The militiamen fished them out because they were Tiv speaking and allowed all the other passengers to go home.

The story of the disappearance of the Tiv students filtered into Makurdi town on Monday evening, sending everyone into mourning.

Another sad aspect of the fighting between Mbalan and Kendev is that the actual number of casualties may take quite long to emerge after the land crisis when villagers would have returned.

At present, more than 10, 000 persons are displaced.

Armed militiamen have taken over the communities and not even armed policemen dare go to the battle zone.

Reporters who went to the battle zone on Monday were driven away by gunfire.

Policemen chose to remain along the main road, insisting that they were not conversant with the terrain. The policemen had every right to be apprehensive, because last year during a similar crisis in the area, militiamen killed two of their men.

Addressing journalists in Makurdi, the Media Adviser to Benue State Governor, Mr. Cletus Akwaya revealed that the traditional ruler of Aliade town, John Wende had been suspended with immediate effect on the grounds that the security report indicted him as being directly involved in the crisis.

He also announced that beginning last Monday; the state government had given the chairmen of the two councils three days to bring the crisis under control or face suspension.

When confronted with the question on why the Benue State Government chose to suspend the traditional ruler of one community, when two communities were involved in a land crisis, Akwaya said the action was dictated by the security report available to the government, not any political consideration or bias.

He said no one should give any political interpretation into the actions of government in taking punitive action against one side in a two-sided bloody fight.

But the Benue State chairman of the Conference of Nigerian Political Parties, CNPP, Mr. Baba Agan said the Suswam

administration should look inwards for the culprits of the violence.

According to him, those funding the crisis are top government officials resident in Makurdi. He said that it was a sad commentary that for two weeks, the fighters were still being supplied with sophisticated weapons adding that no villager can afford the AK47 rifles being used by both sides in the crisis.

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