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## Booted Out Of Bakassi

*From Anietie Akpan, Calabar*

The battle for Bakassi is not yet over, as Camerounian soldiers on Monday sacked Nigerians in Bakassi North which has a population of about 50,000. Over 300 of them (Nigerians) are missing after the soldiers' clash with suspected Nigerian militants.

**I**KANG in Akpabuyo Local Council of Cross River State is overwhelmed with over 3000 Nigerian refugees who escaped the rampaging Camerounian soldiers who attacked their fishing ports abode. The soldiers struck after losing some of their colleagues in a clash with suspected Nigerian militants.

Most of the refugees fled without picking anything, as the Camerounian gendarmes stampeded them out with gunshots and horse whips.

"We have lost everything," lamented one of the women who claimed that what she has left are the clothes on her. Clutching her six-month-old baby, Mrs. Glory Dagbara, an Ogoni from Rivers State agonised: "For over 25 years, we had been in Godsgift fishing port and had lived all our lives there. But now, see how we have been dispossessed of everything we worked for."

At their temporary refugee camp at Government Primary School, Ikang Central, the refugees looked despondent and lost in their land, virtually littering everywhere in the primary school with no beds or mattresses to sleep on.

"This is sad. The Camerounians have breeched the Green Tree Accord and it is not acceptable by us," screamed an embittered Sunday Moses from one of the fishing ports. "We must retaliate, even if it means using the militants. We have to defend ourselves from these gendarmes," he vowed.

One four-year-old kid was reportedly killed, but the Executive Secretary of the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), Mr. Vincent Aqua, disputed the report.

With this development, Nigerians in Bakassi South who are supposed to pull out finally by August this year have vowed not to move an inch from their ancestral homes. Bakassi South, with a population of 105,000 comprising Abana, the headquarters of the ceded Bakassi, Atabong East and West and other villages, is the last hold of Nigeria going by the June 12, 2006 Green Tree Agreement.

Its youths, who had chased away United Nations delegation on a visit to Abana two months ago, declared: "This is our land and we are not going anywhere. The United Nations (UN) must recognise our right to stay where we want to stay and live where we want to live. We have never seen a situation where a group of people are forced into a country they do not want. This is our position and we are not shifting."

Mrs. Martha Andrew from Akwa Ibom State bemoaned: "We came here because the gendarmes drove us away from Wanjo fishing port where we were living. Some of us didn't know where to run. For now, we are just 80 out of the 150 from Wanjo in the camp. We have stayed there (Bakassi) for over 10 years, farming and selling, but now I have lost everything and my children are no longer in school."

Sunday Moses, also Akwa Ibom, noted: "We saw militants attacking Cameroun soldiers and killed them in self-defence, as the leader of the gendarmes had pulled a pistol to shoot the militants. We saw the gendarmes burying two of their soldiers in our land so we were afraid then we ran away. They stopped us from using normal route so we took another route."

Bayelsa-born Bright Zato regretted losing everything, saying: "The gendarmes came and ordered us to go, claiming that Nigeria attacked and killed their soldiers. They burnt my house in Misong fishing port and my boat transportation business

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has stopped now that I am a refugee. The government should please resettle us."

According to Celestine Degbara, 34, an Ogoni fisherman, "the gendarmes pursued us, asking us to leave and I had to leave with my wife and four children. We heard sound of gunshots and flying boats and that is how we packed and came here. We are stranded. The government should help us."

Grace Bonus from Bayelsa, who lived in Sand Sand fishing port, said: "The gendarmes came and pursued us. They said we should go, so we decided to leave, abandoning our property."

Speaking on the incident, the Secretary of Bakassi Council, Mr. Effiong Edet Effiong, said: "Some Nigerians have been held captive in Bakassi North. We are not happy with the ceding of Bakassi to Cameroun. We went to the World Court without making arrangements for our people and that is what is causing this problem."

"Our brothers in the South of Bakassi will not move and they are fully prepared. The (Nigerian) government must give us a location of choice and give us our local council with our 10 wards and 326 villages of Bakassi."

The returnees report seeing heavy Camerounian military build-up, with gunboats at Wanjo and soldiers at Isangehle, close to the Nigerian border and less than 12 nautical miles to Ikang, with no Nigerian presence in the area.

No fewer than 1,000 Nigerians have fled the Peninsular for fear of being killed and are squatting at Ikang in the disputed new Bakassi.

The children were forced to abandon school, but the headmaster of Government Primary School, Ikang, Pastor Evogor Ememg has admitted 210 of them.

Chairman of the Cross River State Resettlement and Rehabilitation Committee, Senator Florence Ita-Giwa, after distributing food and relief materials to the refugees, stated: "This has come as a big surprise to me and now we have a refugee situation."

She assured that boys in Southern Bakassi were being dissuaded from staging reprisal attacks on the gendarmes.

The Executive Secretary of the Cross River Movement for Justice, Mr. Okoi Obono-Obla said the attack had confirmed their reservation and apprehension over the hurriedly packaged Green Tree Agreement.

He urged the Federal Government to take urgent steps to protect Nigerians from further attacks by the Camerounian authorities in their

frenzy and overzealousness to occupy the Bakassi.

On his part, Cross River State Governor, Liyel Imoke, has pledged his government's commitment to give succour to the refugees who are Nigerians mainly from the South-South geo-political zone.

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