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Wednesday, November 26, 2008

## Rumblings in Oturkpo over police killing

*From Simeon Nwakaudu, Makurdi*

**U**SUALLY regarded as the traditional headquarters of the Idoma nation, Otukpo town is also the hub of political and social activities, being the headquarters of Benue South Senatorial District.

Most Idoma, the already powerful and the upcoming ones have homes in Otukpo, may be because it is being positioned to be the capital of the proposed Apa State. And from wherever they live in the state and its neighbours, Idoma people make it a point of duty to spend their weekends in Otukpo, which goes by the name Texas.

So, it was for Mr. John Abah, a 27-year-old politician, who was very popular in Otukpo town.

Though he worked at Otukpa, the headquarters of Ogbadibo Local Council of Benue South, more than 100 kilometres away as personal assistant of the Ogbadibo Local Council Chairman, he had always spent his weekend in Texas, that is Otukpo during which he linked up with friends with whom he spent time.

Friday, November 14, 2008 was the last day that John Abah would ever have communion with friends at Otukpo.

At about 7.30pm that day, bullets fired by a police patrol team cut him down.

The young man had gone out as usual that evening to commune with friends when his life was cut short at the Otukpo Beer Parlour.

Since the killing, fears of a reprisal attack on police stations in the town have loomed, as youth groups held meetings all through the weekend over the incident.

On Monday, hundreds of aggrieved youths from Benue South Local Council thronged the Och'Idoma Palace at Otukpo where they staged a peaceful protest over the incident.

The protest coincided with the visit of the Chairman, Police Service Commission (PSC), Parry Osayande, to the Och'Idoma Palace.

For close to one hour, the protesters sang anti- police songs in front of the palace, with more than 60 policemen drafted to maintain law and order during the PSC chairman's visit stopping them at the gate of the palace.

The protesting youths displayed placards which read: "We are tired of police brutality", "We want the Police Divisional Police for Otukpo removed", "Abah was slain in cold blood", "The Federal Government must investigate this killing of a rising star."

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But the policemen on ground prevented the chairman of the PSC and members of the commission from meeting and hearing the protesters, whose main mission was to ensure that they were heard by the highest authority that decides the faith of police officers.

Rather, the PSC chairman and other members were led away from the Palace, sirens blaring, with the placards carrying youths looking at the retreating convoy of cars in disbelief.

Ironically, Mr. Osayande and the Och'Idoma had exchanged views on the problems associated with the vices of policemen on duty. The Och'Idoma had remarked that with the experience of Osayande, if he failed to resolve these problems, the Nigeria Police would remain mired in its vices.

However, the paramount ruler made no mention of the killing of the youth, despite the claim by his family that the traditional ruler had been officially notified. Apart from the official communication, no resident of Otukpo, let alone the traditional ruler would claim to be ignorant of the killing that has begun to threaten the peace in the area.

After the protest, the family of the slain John Abah addressed journalists at Otukpo, where their spokesman Agada Abah alleged that the killing of their brother was masterminded by a senior police officer at a public beer parlour in Otukpo.

According to the family, the police officer after an exchange of words with Abah put a call across to a patrol team, which arrived at the beer parlour and allegedly shot dead the youth politician.

The family said: "We want to know why our brother was killed. The Police Officer was at the drinking beer and was the one who put a call across to the police patrol team, to come to the scene, that there was a bad boy there. An eyewitness was there and was also brutalized and is ready to testify.

"Our brother is innocent. We met with the Police officer who confirmed the incident but claimed that he did not authorize the killing. The death has brought sorrow to the family."

The family said that it has written a petition to the Inspector General of Police on the matter, adding that the petition was copied to all the relevant government agencies for action.

A youth, Hilary Obande, who claimed he was at the scene of the incident, told The Guardian that John Abah was murdered in cold blood.

He said that after an argument, the police officer had called on the patrol team, which arrived the beer parlour after some minutes.

According to him, the policemen on the team descended heavily on Abah, before he was dragged outside and shot twice. The bullets hit his chest and stomach. He died instantly.

He said that as the shots shattered the peace of the night, everybody, including the patrol team fled the area.

Two years ago, Otukpo faced similar crises, when policemen killed a young man over a protest by residents to a PHCN facility due to power outage.

In Makurdi, a police patrol team had killed two students of the Benue

State University in cold blood in the early 2000. The protests of residents and the family of the deceased led to the investigation and subsequent prosecution of the affected policemen. Two of the policemen, including the DPO, Mr. N. Godspower were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Contacted, the Public Relations Officer of the Benue State Police Command, Samuel Jinadu, a Deputy Superintendent, confirmed that the police had received a petition complaining of the alleged brutal murder of John Abah by policemen on patrol at Otukpo on November 14, 2008.

He said that the command has started full investigations into the matter to ascertain the true position of things. He appealed to the aggrieved youths to remain calm and await the outcome of the police investigations.

On Monday evening, detectives led by an assistant commissioner of police from the Benue State Police Command arrived Otukpo to begun the investigations.

The public has received the claim by the police that it would investigate the matter with a pinch of salt.

In 2005, Suleyol, a 17year old waitress at Treatise, a high profile restaurant in Makurdi was slain in cold blood by patrol policemen. After public uproar, the police promised to commence investigation. After the public forgot about the issue, the police also placed it in the back burner.

Till date, the Benue State Police Command has taken no action on the death of that promising waitress.

Many are afraid that the current issue may end in a similar manner, given the way the PSC chairman was kept in the dark of the whole affair by policemen on ground.

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