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Wednesday, August 05, 2009

Murder stalks the neighbourhood

From Kelvin Ebiri, Port Harcourt

ABOUT 11.00 p.m. on Thursday, July 23, Mr. Nelson Ekperi, who was away in Okeize, received a telephone call from a neighbour.

It was to the effect that his wife, Franca, had been attacked near his residence at Omu-Odudoro-Okemini extension, Rumuagholu, a suburb of Port Harcourt, and that she was in a critical condition.

An apprehensive Ekperi contemplated returning to Port Harcourt that night but was dissuaded by relations.

The next morning, he dashed back to the state capital and found his wife, who was inflicted with several machete cuts in a state of coma.

Four days later, she died.

The killing of Mrs. Franca Ekperi has heightened security concerns around Omu-Odudoro-Okemini extension, Rumuagholu, where recently a gang of bandits raped a nursing mother.

The bereaved Ekperi told The Guardian his wife and his 18-year-old cousin, Emeka Akwube, were returning home from Orazi, where they own a shop that Thursday night.

Due to the deplorable state of the road to Omu-Odudoro-Okemini extension, which is impassable for vehicles, his wife and cousin alighted at Christ Divine Victory Church, by Pipeline junction and were walking home when suddenly they noticed a tall, huge, dark man trailing them.

According to him: "Suddenly, the man, whom they suspected might be a native of the area, disappeared from sight, only to reappear ahead of them shortly after."

His cousin, Emeka, who is still recuperating from the machete cuts inflicted on him, told The Guardian the man even greeted them politely.

Akwube said: "We were less than 500 metres to our house when we saw the man again. He greeted my uncle's wife, 'Good evening ma' and she responded.

Suddenly, he tried to snatch her bag and she left it for him. Yet, he went ahead to attack her with a dagger and machete. I tried to defend her but the man overwhelmed me. The man stabbed me too."

Sobbing as he recalled the incident, Akwube said the assailant continued to strike at his aunt with the machete, even after she had fallen.

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"I tried to grab the man but his machete struck my head. He also came after me. As I ran, I fell but managed to stand up and continued running.

The man later ran away with the bag. In the darkness, I returned to where my uncle's wife was in a pool of blood. I called her repeatedly, but she was not responding. At this point, I started shouting, dogs within the area started barking furiously but help was not forthcoming," Akwube said.

He continued: "I then decided to run home to her brother who lives with us. As I was rushing home and shouting that my uncle's wife was dying, our neighbour, Mr. Didia Eleazar Okwukwu, came out and I took him to where she was lying lifeless and bleeding."

"He brought his car and we were taken to hospital. They stitched the wound to stop the bleeding from my head."

A Chemical Engineer, Ekperi, who has been living in Rumuagholu since February 2008, explained that when he visited the hospital the next day, he discovered that his wife had several cuts on her head, hands and legs. Amid his wife's excruciating pains, he had prayed fervently for her to survive.

"I told the doctor and nurses to take good care of my wife, that money was not the problem. For four days, they fought for her life.

I called my pastor, my neighbours to pray for her. But by 5.10p.m. on July 27, she died. We took her to Military Hospital and waited for three hours, hoping she will wake up, but she never did. I lost my wife just like that," he said.

Okwukwu told The Guardian he was sleeping when suddenly he heard someone shouting 'Please help! Engineer's wife is dying.'

He said he initially became frightened, but later armed himself with a machete and came out.

He approached the shouting Akwube, and asked him what was wrong. The young boy led him to where his uncle's wife was lying.

Okwukwu explained that he immediately alerted other neighbours who came out to revive the dying woman.

"Her husband was not in town and so we had to bear the responsibility of saving her life. Because of the bad road, we could not drive to the spot, so we had to use a wheelbarrow to bring her to the car. After the initial treatment at the hospital that night, the doctor told us her chance of survival was 50/50. We were not dispirited because she was still breathing. But unfortunately, she died," Okwukwu said.

When contacted, the Rumuodumaya Division Police Officer, Mr. Aderemi Adeoye, confirmed the incident.

He said the case was not reported to the police until she died. However, he said the police had begun investigations.

Adeoye said, "We have commenced investigation. Unfortunately, the brother of the man who was with the woman during the incident that night could not identify the suspect. He could not give any description that would help us. We have started monitoring the area to see if we can get a clue that will assist u."

The murder of Mrs. Ekperi, a Marketing graduate of Oko Polytechnic,

has left her husband, emotionally devastated. He has refused to speak of her in past tense.

Ekperi said: "My wife is a very good person, accommodative. Since I married her, she has brought glory, joy and blessing to my family. She accepts everyone irrespective of who the person is. And for someone to murder such a beautiful soul in her prime, I consider this act iniquitous."

He continued: "She is my love. We call each other Sweet-heart. She is very industrious and has been a source of inspiration. It is very unfortunate that she was callously killed. I am devastated and life will never remain the same. I have lost a part of me. I have lost a friend and a soul mate."

Ekperi insisted there is an urgent need for government to address the security lapses in Port Harcourt and its suburbs. He called for the immediate rehabilitation of the road leading to Omu-Odudoro-Okemini extension and several others in the area as well as the installation of streetlights, which would enable unsuspecting vulnerable residence of the area to see anyone lurking around at night.

"If our neighbourhood is accessible by car, my wife would not have trekked home. Government should address the security challenge in this area before someone else is murdered. There is no week that we do not record, at least, one robbery incident. They should install streetlights on the roads," added Ekperi.

Okwukwu disclosed that prior to the murder of Mrs. Ekperi, he had reported to the Rumuokoro Police Station that robbers had been terrorising the area.

According to him, a police patrol team was assigned to the area, but due to the deplorable state of the road, the team could not effectively police the area.

He said had it not been that their owners inhabit the houses in the area; everyone would have relocated to other parts of the city considered safer. He called for the rehabilitation of the road and the establishment of a police post.

"The government should help us. We are all Rivers indigenes and we deserve protection.

Recently, bandits raped a nursing mother. I have children and I would not want them to be killed by bandits while running home from school. I also do not want to be killed," said Okwukwu.

President of the Odudoro-Okemini Landlords and Tenants Association, Mr. Chika Onuegbu, who condemned the murder, told The Guardian that inhabitants of the area have been living in constant fear.

He said the association and the community had in the past, set up a vigilance group, which, due to the bad road and lack of electricity, found it has been difficult to monitor the activities of criminals.

He appealed to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to prevail on the contractor to conclude the rehabilitation of the Omu-Oduduru Okemini extension road.

"We pay our taxes and we are citizens of this state. It is not only those who live in the Government Reservation Areas (GRAs) who deserve to be protected by the state.

"If not for the intervention of neighbours, Akwube would have died as

well. We are appealing to NDDC to fast-track road project. Last time, a nursing mother was raped and now someone has been murdered. Is it when we all die that government will come to our rescue?"

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