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Friday, January 29, 2010

Calm, then peace returns to Jos after the storm

From last week Sunday until early this week, sectarian violence swept through Jos/Bukuru in Plateau State in which hundreds of people were killed. Thousand others were displaced. Now, calm is returning and the residents are learning to live together in peace again.

From Isa Abdulsalami, Jos

ALL through last week until early this week, it was impossible to walk on the streets of Jos/Bukuru metropolis, Plateau State. Arrows were flying about. Machetes gleamed in the hazy harmattan sun. Dane guns and raffles boomed. All kinds of weapons were freely being used against opponents.

And the combatants were residents of Jos, the ancient tin city that has weather almost similar to the temperate regions'. Whites love the cool weather of Jos on the plateau.

Nigerians too love the area. The land is arable. The rivers and streams hold large quantities of fish. The wildlife game is fantastic. The industries are not many but Jos has a strong pull on people of all races.

People who had lived together in Jos and its environs for ages were suddenly at each other's throats, eager to spill blood mid-January.

It is not that the January 17 violence is new to the residents of Jos. No. There have been several sectarian or politically-induced cum sectarian violence in the past. The last of such was in November 2008. In all the previous crises, the Christians and the Muslims were the main combatants. Before the January 17 violence, there was another in 2001.

Almost taking a fabled seven-year cycle, optimists were not expecting another violence in Jos before 2015 or thereabout until this year's broke the myth.

By the time Vice President Goodluck Jonathan visited Jos, the epicenter of the battlefield early this week, normalcy was beginning to return to the troubled city. Some measure of peace has returned to Jos.

But many people from all parts of the country had fled. Some were evacuated by their state governments back to their states of origin. The returnees had tales of woe to narrate. There were several other people who chose to stay behind. They managed to survive the crisis. They are already re-building their lives from the ruins of last week.

Before now, commercial activities were completely paralyzed as people ran away to safety. The commercial inertia became more pronounced by the initial 5.00 p.m. to 10.00 a.m. curfew imposed by the governor, Jonah David Jang, when the crisis erupted.

The curfew and the police and the soldiers that were drafted in when the police could no longer cope, could not stop the carnage immediately. The killings still persisted in some arrears, especially in

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the suburbs.

When the numbers of the dead rose dramatically from about 20 of the first day of the crisis to over 200 of Tuesday last week, Jang then increased the curfew to 24-hours. And a total curfew has its deleterious effect on the populace, especially the poor who live on their daily intake.

It was not long before many residents saw the 24-hour curfew as very harsh and strangulating. And therefore cried out. The state government, heeding the popular outcry of the people, reviewed and relaxed the curfew hours to start from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. Yet people refused to come out.

From Tuesday this week, commercial activities began to pick up. The mortal fear, of being shot at by combatants and being arrested by security agencies, began to give way to confidence. Security personnel almost everywhere assured people that they were safe. Only the ugly scars of the violence were there to remind people that for a total of six days, there was war. The burnt houses - including churches and mosques. The mortuaries brimming with corpses. The injured. The displaced people.

At the Ahmadu Bello Way, the commercial nerve centre of Jos, business activities have started to boom by yesterday - as if nothing had happened. This time around, blood-letting and destruction of property did not visit the area especially with the quick deployment of the soldiers to the streets.

The prices of foodstuffs doubled while taxi fares also doubled because of the suspension of commercial motorcycles plying the streets. Many people walk long distances to get to their destination. Government believes that the motorcycles popularly called "goings" or "achaba" were always used to perpetrate havoc.

Besides, the crisis disrupted the epileptic supply of fuel products to the city. Government's ban of open sale of fuel in containers called jerry cans, further accentuated the bad situation. Commuters groan. When there was no ban on buying fuel in jerry cans, there were products everywhere in the state except at the filling stations. It was being alleged that the sale of the products in jerry cans was being encouraged by some vested interest groups.

Traders are not finding the suspension of commercial motorcycles easy because there are no enough access roads, which are plied by taxis. Traders sometimes charter taxis to convey their goods to the market. This hardship, of course, is visited on the buyers who are at the receiving end.

Nigerians are not good students of history. We easily forget the past which some people say is good. In Jos, Muslims and Christians are now interacting and narrating their ordeal during the crisis as if the crisis was not ignited on a religious line. This interaction takes place mostly at market and business centres. Such slogan like "Happy survival" is always uttered to connote that they are grateful to God that they survived the crisis. Maybe, they are pretending to forget while still hiding their bitterness.

To ensure that lasting peace is assured in Plateau, Vice President Jonathan immediately directed the military to take over the internal security operations from the Police to be commanded by the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 3 Armoured Division of the Nigerian Army, Maxwell Khobe Cantonment, Rukuba Barracks, Maj.-Gen. Saleh Maina. He has since taken charge assisted by other security agencies to stop the madness.

The Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Lt.-Gen. Abdurrahman Dambazau,

was in Jos last week to assess the level of destruction to lives and property. The visit further encouraged some fleeing residents to come out of their cocoon to start their lives again. He condemned the crisis. He addressed some internally displaced persons' camps where he assured the victims to be patient and that government would do everything humanly possible to bring succour to them. Gen. Dambazau directed the GOC to avail them the army medical team to take care of their health and sanitary needs.

To boost the people's confidence, the Vice President was in Jos on Tuesday to assess the destruction. He visited almost all the areas affected by the crisis. He visited the ECWA Church, Jos - Jarawa, the Air Force Primary School, Rikkos, Yan Shanu and St. Michael Catholic Church in Nassarawa Gwong. He was conducted round by Governor Jang; the Acting State Police Commissioner, Ikechukwu Aduba; and the GOC. They also visited Congo/Russia and some parts of Bukuru including the 'B' Police Headquarters to see displaced persons. Jonathan was stunned by the magnitude of destruction and was initially almost speechless.

At the Police Staff College where he addressed the victims, the Vice President said the Federal Government was deeply saddened by the event. He stated that government would do all it could to make sure that the crisis would be the last in Jos and Plateau State. He then appreciated the role of the security agencies and the Plateau State Government for containing the situation. The Chairman of the Governors' Forum who is the Governor of Kwara State, Bukola Saraki, also appealed for calm and assured that all other governors were behind the government and people of Plateau at that trying moment.

At this time, individuals and corporate organisations are sending their goodwill messages to the government and people of the state to assure them that they are solidly behind them and that peace is creeping in gradually. For example, Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Plateau State chapter commiserated with the government and people of the state over the unfortunate crisis and appealed to government to provide the displaced persons relief materials. The Association acknowledged the tremendous assistance of the security agencies, state and federal governments for their prompt reactions and commended the efforts of the doctors and other health workers for the medical assistance they rendered during the crisis. The association advocated the immediate release of all the reports of previous crises in the state for implementation and called on government to sanction those who are indicated no matter how highly placed in the society.

As peace crawls back to Jos and environs, the Advisory Board of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Plateau State Chapter, recalled that they alerted the world after the 2008 orgy of violence about rumours of plans to burn churches, murder pastors, and Christians in Jos in the not too distant future.

According to the state chairman of the PFN, Dr. Sam Alaha, "we had appealed to the planners of these dastardly acts to desist from their evil intentions. We had also suggested to the government of Da Jonah David Jang and security operatives in the state to take specific actions to forestall any possibility of such acts repeating themselves. We thank the state government for steps taken alongside our suggestions. This notwithstanding, our fears had been confirmed sooner than we thought. On Sunday, January 17, 2010, worshippers of ECWA Church, Yan Trailer and other churches in Nasarawa Gwong Jos were rudely interrupted by armed Muslim youths, shouting Allahu Akbaar, who descended upon them with dangerous weapons to kill and maim them without any provocation at all. That expectedly led to skirmishes within and beyond the premises of the churches. Within days, the carnage spread like wild fire to most parts of Jos and Bukuru metropolis".

He put the death toll on the part of Christians at 600 while over 1,000 were injured and more than 3,000 displaced.

Alaha continued: "Since the Jos fight had waned, the terrorists who were trained by Talibans, stepped down to train others in bushes surrounding Bauchi and other places in the nation. They therefore turned this violent spirit on the city during the last Bauchi Boko haram crisis. These trained fighters are the reason why the Jos crisis cannot end. These special Taliban-trained fighters brought into our dear city of peace, insisting on trying out their wicked acquired killing skills."

He ended his address on a sad note and pessimism: "Until this root is traced and totally excised, we see our city still smoking in their hands even without provocation. There is no denying the fact that some innocent Muslims were also affected by the way of reactions but this could have been wholly avoided if the Sunday morning attacks by these Taliban-trained fighters did not happen".

Some people believe the cleric's casualty figures were not real.

A public affairs analyst, John Musa, flayed the PFN chairman, warning all clerics to stop dishing out false casualty figures, adding that they are not useful at the moment.

Refuting some media reports about possible reason for the riots, Alaha said: "From all indications, a carefully planned mayhem was visited upon unsuspecting Christian worshippers on a Sunday morning. What we and all Nigerians want to know is why some people have decided to destabilize Jos and Plateau State by all means? What could be the reason for this?...Whatever the possible reason for this terror-like attack, we believe the government at all levels must take decisive actions to safeguard the lives and property of innocent Nigerians".

The Zonal Director of the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Mr. Steve Alukp-Daniel, condemned the wanton destruction of innocent lives and property.

For him, "increasingly, the root of these crises is clearly on the perceived question of land re-acquisition and expansionist tendencies, marginalization and manipulations of religion within a largely fragmented and dislocated society coupled with near or absence of good governance at federal, state and local government levels. The protested sponsors and perpetrators only exploited (the situation) to main, kill and commit arson but only used the cover of religion as a tool to mobilize and cover up their predetermined selfish goals and reigns of impunity.

"The religious and traditional rulers must accept their failure in harnessing the resourcefulness of their followers to demand for good governance, justice, equity, peace and development from the government," he said.

He further advised the government to dissuade the clerics from making provocative statements so as not to jeopardize the efforts of the government in trying to find lasting solution to the mayhem.

According to him, as peace is returning to the tin city, people should not be reminded of the harrowing things that happened to them during the crisis. The more old wounds were re-opened, the angrier they become and the experience sticks.

He said that until the issue of religion is resolved, crisis would never abate. An understanding has to be struck between the Christians and Muslims and that whoever fell victim of the last crisis should take it as his/her fate.

To Alaha, a way forward to averting future crises is for government to

implement findings and recommendations of previous panels and commissions while the state government should also form its own anti-religious riot vigilante group to work as the first response group to any uprising before the police arrive.

He stated that the issue of security agents taking sides with people of their faith should be stopped asking: "Can anyone imagine what happens to Nigeria if all security agents sent to quell religious riots decide to pitch tent with people of their own faith? This issue must be carefully looked into and measures taken to forestall recurrence".

Also addressing a press conference yesterday, the state chapter of the Civil Society Coalition, recommended speedy prosecution and punishment of all those arrested in connection with the January 17 crisis to serve as deterrent to others that government would no longer condone senseless destruction of lives and property, adding that government reports of previous commissions of inquiry should be implemented.

Mr. Joseph Sangosanya along with human rights activist, Dr. Tor Lorapuu, speaking in Jos during the week, said that the coalition supports the ban of commercial motorcycles in the Bukuru/Jos metropolis and suggested that there should be a joint task force on security and not just the military alone.

Sangosanya advised government to make available fuel as it has banned the open sale of petrol in jerry cans.

He advised the Inspector-General of Police and the Federal Government to transfer the culprits that were apprehended during the November 2008 and January 2010 crisis from Abuja back to Jos for prosecution.

The Director-General, Nigeria Governor Forum, Mr. Asishanu Okauru, leading a delegation of the staff of the secretariat to Jos to commiserate with the people and government of Plateau State over the unfortunate crisis of January 17,

urged the government to implement all recommendations of previous commissions on crises in the state, to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The President of the PFN, Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, has also appealed to members of the National Assembly to empower state governors to prosecute perpetrators of religious crisis in their states.

His plea was prompted by the fresh outbreak of violence in Jos, last week.

In a statement made available to The Guardian, the cleric offered solutions to the perennial religious skirmishes in some parts of the country.

Oritsejafor urged the media to avoid mix-up of issues when reporting such crises with the excuse that it was being done in public interest.

"What interest is the media serving or protecting when innocent Christians are being mauled down persistently in the northern parts of the country at any slightest opportunity?

"I think the media owe this nation the responsibility to preserve the country's unity by saying the truth at all times. It is becoming a resurgent too many".

He also suggested a political solution that will involve the 17 southern states governors, whose citizens are at the receiving end of such mayhem to engage their 19 northern counterparts in a dialogue to protect them.

"The National Assembly should also enact laws that will empower state

governors to prosecute master-minders of ethno-religious crises in any part of the nation."

The clerics also charged the Federal Government to take urgent steps to implement similar recommendations on the matter to save the nation from being plunged into a major religious war.

"I want our political leaders to realize that no nation has ever survived a religious war. It is much more devastating than an ethnic war.

"The dimension Jos crisis is taking is sending a red signal to the nation and something urgent must be done to address it. I, therefore, plead with the relevant authorities to move fast and stop the growing tide of religious intolerance in the country."

A Muslim leader and Islamic Scholar in Rivers State, Dr. Abdulrazag Kilani, said that the recent clash is condemnable.

According to him, "we need a leader to resolve the issue of crisis between indigenes and settlers from our national life.

"If indeed we are a true federal state, then citizens must be free to live in any part of the federation without hindrance, having respect for one another's religious beliefs", he said.

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