

NEWS.

Army Brutality...The 'Boys' At It Again

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AS a result of long military rule in Nigeria, army brutality remains a major concern for citizens, even after 15 years of democracy. From the East to West, North and South, there's always a sad tale of army brutality, not just on poor civilians, but also on government institutions.

Sometimes, it appears the 'military boys' are yet to come to terms with the fact that the era of 'khaki mentality' is over. And with most of Nigerian soldiers currently living outside the barracks, cases of brutality

against civilians will always occur.

Again, the influx of retired military men into politics, with some of them occupying top positions in government and other influential political appointments, it seems 'barracks boys' still feel the army is still in control indirectly, which explains their continuous brutality against civilians. In most cases, it might just be as a result of minor disagreement.

For daring to exchange words with an army officer on January 15, 2009, a 70-year-old man, Joseph Okechukwu Agu, was allegedly given the beating of his life. He did not believe, back then, as the blows rained down on his hapless head that he would live to testify before a public tribunal on the incident that transpired between him and the soldier. The aged man met his Waterloo, when an enraged army Sergeant, Francis Ogah, who is serving at the 82 Division, Enugu Barracks dragged him off his lorry and gave him the beating of his life, with the metallic buckle of his belt that later led to his total blindness.

Narrating his ordeal on that fateful day, Agu, who is now assisted by his wife to move about, said, "On January 15, 2009, at about 8.30a.m, I was attacked by Sergeant Francis Ogah with his belt. The soldier hit my face with the metallic buckle of his belt, and that led to the blindness in both of my eyes. The incident took place along Abakpa-Ogui Road, Enugu."

Recently in Lagos, soldiers attached to the Flag House, Force Road, Lagos, were accused of killing a 61-year-old man, Adewale Olupitan-Hazzan. Sources alleged that the soldiers, who were driving in a military convoy on Ikorodu Road on July 15, went on the rampage and brutalised Adewale, a road user, for allegedly breaking the side mirror of one of the vehicles in their convoy. It was gathered that Adewale was bundled out of his Toyota Camry and thoroughly beaten by the soldiers at the Obanikoro end of Ikorodu Road, while his younger brother, Adedotun, said his brother even up till the time of his death, insisted that he did not do anything wrong to warrant such brutality.

A death certificate issued by LUTH dated July 29, indicated Adewale suffered from subdural hematoma following a head trauma. The certificate signed by Dr. Alagbe, stated that the primary cause of Adewale's death was 'Subacute Subdural Hematoma,' the secondary cause was 'Cardiopulmonary failure.'

When contacted on the phone, the spokesperson for the 81 Division of the Nigerian Army, Lt. Col. Kayode Ogunsanya, said he was not aware of the incident.

Last year in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, what looked like a normal day turned out to be a nightmare in the early hours of 22nd of July 2012, at around 2.30am, when about six soldiers of the Nigeria Army in uniform attached to the PHCN Capital Building at Ring Road Ibadan, reportedly went berserk on an unprovoked savage brutalisation. The victim was Mr Akintokunbo Adejumo, a community leader in Ibadan and Southwark Borough in London and the Global Coordinator of Champions for Nigeria (Champions for Growth of Nigeria Initiative), a registered Organisation in the UK and Nigeria, with members all over Nigeria, continental Africa, Europe, Asia and America.

The attack allegedly happened in the full glare of members of the public when a strange fire outbreak occurred within the premises of the PHCN and engulfed a neighbouring building, damaging irreparably properties worth millions of Naira affecting the ex-Barcelona and Nigerian International footballer, Gbenga Okunowo's private home.

Again, when, on November 10, 2008, Uzoma Okere was brutalised by some Naval officers in the convoy of a Rear Admiral, for obstructing their way, Nigerians rose in total condemnation of the raw show of power. The case later came up in the court of law where costs were awarded to the brutalised lady and many heaved a sigh of relief, believing that it would serve as deterrent to other power-hungry uniformed men.

Few months after that, there was another case of the Insurance Manager of Nigerian Bottling Company

Plc, Mr. Remi Amos Anowai. The 41-year-old father of three narrated his ugly experience in the hands of a serving army Colonel in traffic at Liverpool Road, Apapa, Lagos.

There was also a report of another incident in Koko, Warri North Local Government Area, Delta State, where soldiers attacked and injured police officers from Delta State Police Command, who were on escort duty with the state Commissioner for Poverty Alleviation, Dr. Anthonia Ashiedu. The soldiers allegedly beat a police corporal, who drove one of the police vehicles, to pulp for allegedly blaring siren in the premises of the Warri North Local Government Council, which is close to a military outpost.

Sometime ago in Bauchi, it was reported that a deputy registrar of the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University (ATBU) Mr. Andee Iheme and his wife Moji, were maltreated by the military. According to the story, soldiers of the 33 Artillery Brigade headquarters in Bauchi went berserk, beating up the couple over a right of way disagreement.

As a matter of fact, the newly reconstructed Ojuelegba Police Station in Lagos is a living witness to the level of recklessness by the Nigerian army; the 'military boy' reportedly burnt down the old structure over a disagreement with the police. Infact, it took the intervention of the top ranking military chiefs to arrest the situation. To a large extent, brutality by soldiers, and even policemen, is not uncommon on Nigerian streets.

So, last Friday when pandemonium broke out in the Onipanu area of Ikorodu Road, Lagos, after a soldier was allegedly knocked down and killed by one of the buses in the fleet of LAGBUS on the BRT lane, it was no big deal for most Lagosians, who are used to such recklessness by 'military boys.'

According to eyewitness, the soldier identified as Matthew Ishaya, was knocked down by one of the buses, after he allegedly rode on the BRT lane and subsequently died due to lack of urgent medical attention. For fear of mob action, the driver of the bus had to flee from the scene of the accident.

However, few hours later, some military men from the Intelligence Unit of the Nigerian Army at Yaba, stormed the Onipanu area of the highway, demanding to know the circumstances surrounding the death of the soldier. Angered by the fact that the bus driver and his conductors made no arrangement to move the late soldier to a nearby hospital for treatment, the 'military boys' reportedly moved into action, burning down BRT buses on sight.

According to a source, the soldiers, who were fully kitted in military uniform, equally maltreated onlookers, who made effort to capture the incident with their camera phones. Also, some journalists, who got wind of the mayhem and reported at the scene were prevented from taking pictures.

However, the Nigerian Army in Lagos has said it would continue to ensure a cordial relationship with civilians in the state. Lt. Col. Omale Ochaguba, the spokesman, 81 Div. Nigerian Army, said against the backdrop of the recent attack on Lagos State Government-owned luxury buses by soldiers. He noted that the recent alleged destruction of BRT and LAGBUS luxury buses were not carried out by their men but by hoodlums.

But an eyewitness, who gave his name as Paul, condemned reckless driving by BRT drivers, but insisting that the soldiers were responsible for the mayhem.

"Last year on Eko Bridge, ascending from Alaka, a BRT Bus pinned a military officer on the wall and cut him in halves; the military came and seized the bus, but they eventually settled the matter. I'm not sure that pain has gone off their heart and suddenly another one was killed; I think it is spontaneous. Even without the military officer getting any order from top hierarchy, they will react."

Paul, who spoke during an interactive radio programme on Smooth FM said, "we drive on Lagos roads and we know how these BRT Buses behave; I don't know if somebody is chasing them or they are angry with

someone, but they are never happy. They will hit your vehicle and because they feel they are driving government vehicle, nothing will happen to them.”

He observed that the situation was heated because a military officer was involved.

“Let the government address this issue very well because if they had killed an ordinary civilian, nothing would have happened, but they killed a military officer and their people reacted. The people that actually came there that day were military officers. I was on that traffic at Onipanu; I saw them. In fact, I had to turn back because the traffic was too much,” he said.

He condemned the action of the military, urging the government to look into the issue to avoid future occurrence.

“Yes, someone was killed, but it doesn’t give them the right to behave the way they did; they don’t have any right to have reacted that way. Going about, setting BRT buses on fire, beating up people, who dared to take pictures... no!”

To Mr. Paul, the action of the soldiers shows the level to which the country has degenerated.

“People can do anything and get away with it. Now, the military have come out to say that the area boys hijacked the situation, but we all know no area boy hijacked anything. It’s the military boys that did it, but they won’t accept it. However, let the Lagos State government talk to their drivers; they drive as if they don’t have brains in their heads. You can’t enter their BRT lane, but when they want to come into the road, they don’t even mind; they just cut into the road. And if you are not careful, they will heat you; the worst you can do is to shout, they will still go. So, the military actually did it, but they will not agree.”

In his contribution, Mr. Yahaya condemned the incident, adding that two wrongs can never make a right.

“It is quite evident that two wrongs can never make a right. When you live in a society governed by constitution, no matter how aggrieved you are, you need to approach the law court to decide and the court decides based on facts and figures, not based on hear say. The point I’m trying to make is that we have gone far in lawlessness. When people are not punished for their crime, this is what will happen. They have done it before, this is not the first time and I’m afraid it may not be the last time.”

Yahaya also tasked government on the need for urgent response in such situation to avoid further damage.

“Immediately the incident happened, some journalists went to Governor Fashola to get his reaction on it and he said he was still expecting report from the MD of LAGBUS. In our society, we need to make things as transparent as possible; this matter now, the highest you will hear is that they have been court-martialed and nothing will come out of it. We need to bring such issues to the conventional court so that everybody will know who is responsible for what and the punishment they are liable to. By the time we do that, we will get a better society,” he said.

In his contribution, Mr. Larry noted that the incident brings to mind the song by Fela, which talked about ‘unknown soldier.’

“This simply shows that there’s something wrong with the Nigerian Army. If they come out and tell us that what we saw were not soldiers, that means they are implicating themselves to say that some hoodlums have access to the Nigerian Army uniform. And if that is true, then they need to get their acts together.”

According to Larry, the incident happened in broad daylight, urging the army to apologies to angry

Nigerians, who witnessed the mayhem.

"If you say that those people that thousands of Nigerians saw in military uniform were not military men, then we are in trouble. It means that people have access to military uniform and they can wear it to do anything. I think it will be better for the Nigerian army to come out and make an apology and say, 'sorry, our boys took laws into their hands, they did wrong and we are going to take disciplinary action,'" he said.

Though he wouldn't point accusing finger on any group in particular, I.K observed that the incident is as a result of bad leadership in the country.

"At this point, I expected the governor of Lagos State and the Army Chief to come out and calm nerves. For me, it's just a leadership problem because, if the soldiers know that their leadership would come after them, I don't think they would have done what they did. So far, they know their leaders would come out and deny or defend their action. I mean, we live in an environment where we have information tools like Facebook, Twitter and all that and somebody will come out to tell us the military didn't do that, that's wrong! Maybe they feel we are still in this whole barbaric setting. I just think our leaders should wake up and show some sense of responsibility," he said.

For Yekini, the military is fond of breaking traffic rules.

"The Nigerian military don't respect traffic laws; you see them ride on the BRT lane. Let the Lagos State government set up a panel to find out the circumstances surrounding the death of the soldier and allow people to air their views. However, they must provide security for whoever wants to testify," he said.

Obviously, for fear of the military, most Lagosians, who witnessed the incident, have refused to make public comments or be quoted on paper. While some of them have taken to social media to vent their anger, others have taken their disgust to phone-in programmes on radio stations. A visit to the scene also indicated that, though the military were responsible for the mayhem, many could not comment on tape for fear of army brutality.



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