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Anti-Grazing Law: Apprehension as Ekiti, Miyetti Allah exchange tirades

By Muiyiwa Adeyemi (Head South West Bureau Ado Ekiti) | 29 October 2016 | 3:14 am

The full implementation of anti-public grazing law of Ekiti State, which regulates the pastoral activities of herdsmen, has raised mutual distrust between cattle rearers and residents, with fears that the tensed situation may snowball into crisis.

The fear was also heightened during the week when Governor Ayo Fayose put the residents, especially those in the boarder towns with Kwara and Kogi states, on “red alert” of an alleged planned attack by the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN).



Fayose

This has led to a ‘war of words’ between the state government and MACBAN over the law and government’s seizure of some cattle that contravened the law.

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Fayose advised the residents to be ready to defend themselves against any attack by the herdsmen.

Since Tuesday when the governor raised the alarm, farmers and traders in Oke Ako, Irele, Apao villages in Ikole Council have been walking in groups and combat-ready to resist any invasion from the herdsmen.

For years, herdsmen from Kwara and Ibira farmers from Kogi have been peacefully cohabiting with the villagers who had played good hosts to them.

The lush green vegetation and fertile land that produces bountiful harvest attracted both the herdsmen and farmers to the Ekiti villages that provide foods and cattle in large quantity at cheaper prices to many neighbouring states.

But the harmonious relationship began to turn sour in 2014 when cattle invaded some farmlands, while the affected farmers, in anger, were said to have killed a cow.

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In retaliation, some suspected killer-herdsmen invaded Oke Ako and Irele, killed and maimed many villagers and destroyed properties worth millions of naira.

The Police Posts at Oke Ako and Irele were not spared, as two policemen were allegedly killed by the herdsmen and their stations sent on fire.

Up till now, the Nigerian Police has not re-built those stations or send men to police the communities, who can only run to the station at Apao, about 20 Kilometres to the flash points, for protection.

Since then, the herdsmen/farmers clash has become a recurrent decimal.

A 70-year-old farmer, who simply identified himself as Mr. Ogungbenle, narrated how he abandoned his farm since 2014 for fear of being attacked by herdsmen, who roam about with sophisticated weapons to protect their cattle and intimidate the farmers.

He alleged that his farmland had been taken over for grazing, but hinted of plans to return to his farm because of the seriousness of the government to protect the farmers.

In May this year, herdsmen again invaded Oke Ako around 10pm with dangerous weapons over the alleged killing of their cow, killing killed two people and inflicting injuries of various degrees on many, while setting houses on fire.

Fayose, on a visit to the injured and villagers, promised that such attack would never happen again.

He was particularly irked by the ordeals of the farmers and how the herdsmen had chased them out of their farmland for grazing.

A month after, he sent the anti-public grazing Bill to the House of Assembly, which was passed and he signed into law in August this year.

It bans public grazing and restricts rustling of cattle to designated areas in the state, just as it proscribed night movement of cattle.

Besides, the law prohibits herdsmen from carrying firearms in the state and culprit will be charged for terrorism.

Legal adviser to the herdsmen, Umar Iman, described the law as a direct way of asking the herdsmen to leave the state, saying it was wrong for government to charge erring herdsmen with terrorism for carrying light weapons, like cutlasses, catapults, bows and arrows.

Imam said: "The law of the federation on terrorism is very clear and no one can be charged for terrorism for carrying lesser arms, like cutlass and knives, during the grazing period as contained in Ekiti new law.

"I made it clear in my submission during the public hearing on the Bill that these Fulani herdsmen use these lesser weapons for certain purposes that can make grazing easier."

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The head of herdsmen in Ekiti, Alhaji Ahmadu Mahmoud, said while they are ready to cooperate with the governor to apprehend killer-herdsmen, he called for an amendment of the law to allow his members carry light arms to ward off attacks from robbers.

But these were off the curve, as many residents, including over 300 traditional rulers that witnessed the signing of the Bill into law endorsed Fayose's practical steps to check the over-bearing influence and seemingly untouchable mien of the herdsmen that have become a thorn in the flesh of the farmers.

In fact, the opposition parties that found it difficult to agree with Fayose's policies and style of governance have not publicly kicked against the law, the first of its kind in the country.

Though there seemed to be a challenge in the implementation of the law, as the state Police Command has kept silent on how to enforce it.

But that would not deter Fayose, who at the inception of the crisis mobilised the local hunters from Ikole council to defend the farmers and ensure no killer-herdsmen attack them again.

To show his seriousness about the law, he led some youths and security men to chase and arrest a cow grazing outside approved areas and it was slaughtered as part of the government's 'stomach infrastructure.'

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The governor recently went a step further by inaugurating Ekiti Grazing Enforcement Marshalls (EGEM), with the mandate to collaborate with the Police to implement the law and also work with the local hunters and various vigilante groups to apprehend any stray cattle and arrest offending herdsmen.

He specifically told the marshalls; “Any cattle found grazing after the time stipulated by the law will be confiscated by the government.

“Such cattle will be sold or killed on the spot and shared to people as part of our stomach infrastructure programme.”

The governor, however, warned them against going beyond their mandate, adding: “This is not an opportunity to harass or intimidate innocent people.

“You are to enforce the law and not to break it. Anybody found going beyond his bounds would be dealt with accordingly.”

Immediately after their inauguration, the marshalls swung into action and pursued herdsmen grazing along Agon Bridge on Federal Polytechnic road in Ado Ekiti and seized five cows.

A cow was allegedly slaughtered to provide free beef for the people within the vicinity, while the herdsmen escaped with other cattle.

But the recent development has angered MACBAN, which warned Fayose to stop the implementation of the law or expect a dire consequence that “may go beyond the state.”

MACBAN also demanded apology from government and compensation for the slaughtered cows, claiming that the “vigilante group shot five cows and carted away the meat, but the herdsman was able to flee with the rest of his cattle.”

It stressed that its members are bona fide citizens of the country, it noted in a statement issued by its spokesman, Baba Othman Ngelzarma.

It sought the intervention of the federal government “before this macabre incident develops into unquenchable inferno involving our members and Ekiti State government.”

But Fayose did not only see MACBAN statement as an affront to his government, but also a threat that should not be overlooked.

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The governor, who accused the federal government of tacit support for the herdsmen, said Ekiti people should be fully prepared to defend themselves against any invasion.

He stressed that the arrested five cattle were in the custody of the Ministry of Agriculture and would not be released until their owners paid appropriate fines as stipulated by the law.

Fayose also condemned the Federal Government for keeping silent over the threat of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria to wage war against the government and people of Ekiti State because of the arrest of the cattle.

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