

‘We killed, buried victim in shallow grave to conceal our leader’s identity’

By Charles Otu, Abakaliki | 04 March 2017 | 2:52 am



the suspects after exhumation of the victims body in the forest

It was a sorrowful and tearful scene last weekend when a kidnap gang made shocking confessions on how they killed and buried Mrs. Catherine Okorie Chukwu, a middle-aged mother of a rich Abuja-based industrialist and indigene of Ishiagu community in Ivo Council of Ebonyi State, who was abducted at her village residence on January 18, this year.

But for the gallant efforts of men of the Special Anti-Kidnapping Squad (SAKS), Ebonyi State Police Command, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and other corresponding units of the Command, who never rested until they unraveled circumstances surrounding the abduction and later, murder and secret burial of the victim, her case could perhaps have remained like one of the many unresolved kidnap and murder cases in the country.

The breakthrough, according to the Command’s Public Relations Officer, Jude Madu, came on the heels of a classified confessional statement made available to Police investigators by one Ogbujule Chukwu Mathew of Lokpanta, Isuochi in Ummunneochi Council of Abia State, who was arrested on February 10, this year.

According to Madu: “He made some confessional statement, which led to the arrest of one Ezenwa Egeonu, male, of same address on February 23. “On interrogation, the said Ezenwa confessed that the victim has been killed by the gang and was buried at Lokpanta, Isuochi in Abia State. He led a team of anti-kidnapping squad of this Command to the scene where the body was buried.

“The area has been identified, that was why the Command made adequate arrangements for the exhumation of the body.” Ezenwa, it was gathered, started playing pranks with the Police after his confession and vital disclosures and became patently evasive for weeks during attempt to make him take the anti-kidnapping team where his men buried the victim.

“He took our men there and instead of showing the exact spot, he started taking the Police round that vast bush until the early morning of Sunday, when he said his time was up and he was then ready to talk. “He then took our men to the exact spot where they buried the woman,” Madu told The Guardian in an exclusive interview.

The journey to the exhumation of the already-decomposed remains of the late Mrs. Chukwu was a tortuous one. The state Police Commissioner, Titus Lamorde, who was just settling down to his new posting, made extensive efforts and preparations as soon as the facts were established and delegated the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) in charge of Criminal Investigations Department (CID) to lead the operation.

The journey, which involved a team of not less than 50 policemen, 15 Hilux vans of various units of the Command, an ambulance, morticians, Head of Pathology Department, Federal Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki, took over 10 hours.

When the search team took off from Abakaliki, with The Guardian in the convoy, it stopped over Ivo Division to pick a ready SARS team that was communicating with a team of the SAKS, who had reportedly been in the forest for the past two weeks.

It headed off to Lokpanta, which shares boundaries with Ishiagu in Ivo Council of Ebonyi State, almost directly across the road along the Enugu-Port Harcourt Expressway.

After less than 10 minutes’ drive through terrains without buildings located therein, the teams landed in a village market called Eke Isuochi and picked someone that linked them up with the SAKS first team some kilometres away from the market along a major road leading to the forest. The man, in his late 30s (name withheld), claimed to be leader of an association in Lokpanta.

On sighting the heavily-armed Police team, panicky village traders at the market were gripped with apprehension. After riding through a rough road of about three kilometres, the team was successfully handed over after to a ready SARS team with the prime suspect and two others, including a woman in her mid 40s.

The vehicles later came to a stop and the team, armed, not only with guns, but also bags of water and some snacks, began the search operation. Walking through a rough and barren forest in a not-too-clearly distinctive boundary between Lokpanta in Abia State and Awgu in Enugu State, which lasted for 25 minutes, the team found itself in a carnal, called Lekpesi, a shallow river nearly separating the two neighbouring states.

A jubilant combined team of SAKS with some SARS men, who had been camped in the thick forest for about two weeks and were reportedly feeding mainly on cashew nuts, welcomed the team. With them were four suspects said to be directly or indirectly linked with the dastardly act.

Then came the moment of confession. Ezenwa spoke first upon interrogation: “That pally (pointing at one of the suspects) carry us come here, me and Pilot. We be three, Mathew (the ring leader) four and that Ampelo. We dey six in number. Na that Ampelo (from Ishiagu) say make we kill am. En say because mama (the victim) don see him face, make we kill am.

“I tell them say make them no kpai mama. The man come slap me for back. Na en the other guy (Chibuike, the gang leader) say him go shoot me. I tell dem say this thing wey dem wan do mama no dey good. Na en dem come tell me say make I comot. I come go up there go sit down (pointing to a hilly side of the shallow river).

“As I come sit down there, I come hear kpowai. I dey like this (pointing his head to the ground). Pilot come ask me whether I dey cry? I tell am say I dey cry. I tell am say this thing wey una do, before next week now, una go hear am. Na im I come carry my machine (motorcycle) go back,” the suspect confessed.

He disclosed that they had tried to escape Police search by hiding Mrs. Chukwu in Mathew’s backyard compound in Amaekwuru village, Isuochi in Lokpanta for several hours and escaped into the forest when they got information that the Police were on their trail, where the victim was later shot dead on the orders of the said Ampelo, who told the gang that he did internship in Abuja through the help of the victim’s son and she had already seen and identified his face; hence they should not spare her life or they would all be in danger.

After the exhumation of the body for autopsy, the team was later taken late in the evening to the said compound, where the kidnappers kept the victim upon her abduction from Ishiagu, said to be the gang-leader’s residence.

On arriving the village, which had been largely deserted due to the serial criminal indulgence of young people from the area, the Police were taken to the said backyard by Ezenwa, where they made frantic search for the recovery of the exhibits to no avail.

Ezenwa was heard repeatedly shouting that he would not lie to the Police and knows the exact spot where the gun and bullets were kept. Attempts to get the accurate information from the gang-leader, Chibuike, were unsuccessful, as it was gathered that he said he would rather die than disclose any vital information.

The team returned to Abakaliki late in the night with the exhumed body of the victim, which was deposited at the Federal Teaching Hospital Mortuary, Abakaliki (FETHA) mortuary for autopsy.

The Police team also impounded some exhibits, such as chairs and other household items from the thoroughly ransacked premises of Chibuike (popularly called Umoru), who community sources said has been a 'terror' in their area and a torn in their flesh.

"We have taken the body for autopsy. The result of the autopsy will determine our next line of action. We want to find out if they killed the woman with bullet or poison or any other means, even though one of the suspects confessed at the scene that one of them shot the woman.

"After the autopsy, we shall also update the public," Madu told The Guardian. He said the entire village was on the run to avoid giving the Police information, adding that out of the six suspects directly involved in the kidnap, three kingpins were in the Police custody.

"There are some other persons who are not among the six, but they also contributed in one way or the other to aid this crime. Though I may not give you the exact number for now, but others, such as their native doctor, is already in our net.

"One of the girlfriends of Umoru, who had helped him to escape the very first time, is also in our custody. "Investigations are ongoing and the Police is assuring the family and the public that it will get to the end of it all," he added.

He further hinted that the suspects have not made confessions as to whether a ransom was paid, but may have killed the victim when they realised that Police tracking device was closing in on them, coupled with the confession by one of the suspects that the victim had identified one Ampelo, who did internship in the son's firm in Abuja and who ordered that they should shoot her.

News of the victim's killing was said to have thrown the people of Ishiagu, who had reportedly been at loggerheads with their neighbouring Lokpanta village, into a deep mourning. Lamorde has assured that the Command would do everything within its power to ensure that all suspects linked to the dastardly act are brought to book.