

Tragedy as gunman kills 47 worshippers in Anambra

By Uzoma Nzeagwu (Awka) and Adamu Abuh (Abuja) | 07 August 2017 | 4:35 am



Anambra State Governor Willie Obiano (right) at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital Nnewi with the injured victims of the St. Philips Catholic Church ...yesterday.

- **Dogara, APC condemn attack**
- **Police launch manhunt for killer**

An unknown gunman yesterday invaded St. Philips Catholic Church located in Umuezekwe, Ofufe-Amakwa, Ozubulu community in Ekwusigo Local Government Area of Anambra State and opened fire on the worshippers during the morning mass.

At the end of the attack, about 47 persons lay stone dead with many others critically injured. The 47 worshippers would have prayed to make heaven but they never wanted it the way it happened yesterday. The normal Catholic Mass time of these hours suddenly expanded infinitely into eternity for the slain worshippers. The priest and the serene ambiance of the altar were so violently violated. Fresh human flesh and blood and not the symbolic blood and body of Christ became the tell tales of the 6.00 a.m. mass at the St. Philips Catholic Church Ozubulu. It was indeed a black Sunday.

The attacker and his motive are yet unknown. Indigenes of the Ozubulu community who spoke to The Guardian yesterday only said the priest survived the attack, which they suspected was triggered by a gang war originating from South Africa.

A source in the community explained that the attacker had been on the trail of a famous philanthropist and alleged drug baron in the area, whom he reportedly traced to the church the latter built for the community.

The gunman had stormed the church in search of Ikegwuonwu after visiting his house, but was not lucky as his target had fled on getting wind of the presence of the attacker.

Infuriated by the miss, the attacker reportedly targeted Ikegwonwu's father and stepmother, whom he killed alongside 45 other worshippers. A statement by the Anambra State Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Dr. Tony Nnacheta, said Governor Willie Obiano "deplored this wanton criminality visited on our hapless people. He commiserated with the bereaved families, the priests and the bishop and visited the wounded in hospital where he promised that Anambra would underwrite the cost of their full recovery."

The commissioner said that Obiano, having been briefed by security agencies, traced the cause of the attack to a family feud which "apparently degenerated to gangster style killing totally alien to the values of our people."

"There are also no known sectarian, economic and political undertones in the very unfortunate incident at Ozubulu today. The governor is giving this matter utmost attention and has directed the security agencies to intervene fully and with dispatch to bring all culprits to account for this criminal act. He reassures Ndi Anambra that our collective efforts at enshrining peaceful and secure environment these past 40 months must not be defiled.

"Ndi Anambra are enjoined to remain calm and pray for the cessation of this manner of devilish and unjustifiable pains on our people," the state government said.

There were other explanations. Some people said it could be herdsmen who invaded the church, while others said assassins had come in pursuit of a billionaire son of one high chief whom they traced to the church located near his country home to search for him. "In meeting his absence, they now vented their anger on the parishioners, shooting sporadically at the worshippers," someone said.

An eyewitness, who spoke to The Guardian said the bodies of those killed had been deposited in nearby mortuaries, while the injured were rushed to the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital (NAUTH), Nnewi for treatment. He said some of the injured were in a critical condition because, according to him, they were shot at a close range.

The Anambra State Police Commissioner, Umar Baba Garba, confirmed the incident, but denied reports on the number of people killed, saying an investigation was going on. He said only eight people died in the attack while 18 were injured, adding that only one gunman "who is an indigene of the area" carried out the attack.

He said security operatives were on top of the situation, as he assured that the culprit would be arrested soon. Umar confirmed that the remains of the dead had been deposited at NAUTH while the injured were receiving treatment at various hospitals.

"Preliminary investigations by the police revealed that the attack was carried out by an indigene of the area. From our findings, it is very clear that the attacker must be an indigene of the area. Worshippers were for the 6 o'clock Sunday mass at the church when a gunman dressed in black attire covering his face with a cap entered and moved straight to a particular direction and opened fire. The man, after shooting at his targeted victims, still went on a shooting spree, killing and wounding other worshippers," the police chief said.

According to Garba, information available to police showed that the attacker was speaking undiluted Igbo language at the time he was firing at worshippers. He said though no arrest had been made, the police already learnt that the attack

followed a quarrel between two indigenes of Ozubulu residing overseas.

Describing the act as sacrilegious, the commissioner of police said it was wrong for the perpetrators of the act to extend their quarrel to the church. “Such conduct shows the people behind the act do not fear God.”

The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara, described the attack as abominable, barbaric, inhuman, and the height of wickedness. In a statement, Dogara lamented that insecurity was reducing Nigeria to the state of nature as life was increasingly becoming cheap.

He said his heart was broken by the sad news of the massacre of innocent worshippers in cold blood by people he described as “sons of perdition whose souls will rot in hell.”

“Have we lost our humanity? Where is the place of sanctity of life and sacredness of worship places in our society? What offence did the worshippers commit to warrant their massacre in cold blood by wicked souls and heartless men?” he asked.

Dogara reiterated his call for the overhaul of the nation’s policing architecture that would lead to the reform of the police, equip them with modern and sophisticated gadgets so as to discharge their duties of protecting lives and property effectively, and ensure order in the society.

The speaker, who called on security agencies to fish out the perpetrators of the heinous crime and bring them to justice speedily, condoled with families of the victims, people and government of Anambra State, Nigeria and the Catholic Church over the sad and unfortunate incident.

Also, the All Progressives Congress (APC) commiserated with the Catholic Church in Nigeria, the government and people of Anambra State over the attack

While praying that the souls of the deceased rest in peace, the APC condemned the barbarism displayed by the callous attackers who gunned down defenceless people while they worshipped.