

Living under siege of herdsmen in South-South

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Tension is on the rise across the South-South region after herdsmen recently killed more than 14 persons in Avwon, Agadama and Ohoror communities of Uwheru kingdom in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. This latest attack that has triggered rhetoric of genocidal killings by the Urhobo Progressive Union (UPU) and other stakeholders was one of the bloodiest incidents perpetrated by nomadic herdsmen in the South-South region, who have wreaked havoc in Delta, Rivers, Edo, Delta and Akwa Ibom States in recent times.

Between Thursday and Saturday last week, unspecified numbers of armed herdsmen in search of grazing path, invaded the aforementioned communities and allowed their herds of cattle to stray into locals' farmland and destroyed farm products. Growing frustrations and grievances against the herdsmen had resulted in frequent violent encounters between locals and the herdsmen, dating back to 2000, and have resulted in tensed relationship between them.

Thus, on sighting the herdsmen, incensed youths, who accused the herdsmen of often destroying their crops, polluting streams and unleashing terror on farmers, especially women, quickly mobilised and warded them off their farms.

But the herdsmen, who have been compelled by changing climatic conditions to migrate Southwards for lush green grass, perceived that their survival that is dependent on their cows was being threatened, regrouped, armed themselves with lethal weapons, reinvaded the communities and went on killing spree that had left over 14 dead.

At the hostility, several corpses including those of eight farmers had been recovered from shallow graves where they were hurriedly dumped by the marauding herdsmen. Delta State Commissioner for Higher Education, Prof. Patrick Muoboghare, who hails from the Uwheru, told The Guardian that the herdsmen killed several persons and buried them in shallow graves, perhaps, to cover up.

"Six more shallow graves, where our boys were buried, have been discovered by our gallant boys. We are waiting for the military and police high command to come and evacuate them. Yesterday, two corpses were deposited at Ughelli. We are still counting," Muoboghare said. The commissioner, who also indicted the army of complicity in the

invasion of Uwheru, said, after the herdsmen had finished killing, soldiers were deployed to the community to protect the herdsmen from reprisal attacks.

“In the last few years, they had killed not less than 50 people in the community, and the yearly killings were a plot by the Fulani herdsmen to take over our land. Before now some Fulani herdsmen were arrested and handed over to the police, but they were promptly freed, because the police national command structure is in the hands of Fulani officers. The community, known for its production of sweet potatoes, groundnut, pepper and fish can longer go to their farms due to the menace of herdsmen,” he said.

The violent clashes between farmers and herders have been recurrent in Delta State since 2000. But it reached an alarming magnitude since 2017 till last week. The herdsmen’s nefarious activities had been mainly in Ughelli North, Ethiope East, Ndokwa West and East Local Government Areas of the State. But Uwheru and Abraka have largely borne the brunt of brigandage and violence.

Former president-general of the Uwheru Community Development Association, Ogarivi Utso, explained that the nomadic herdsmen always arrive the community during the dry season, especially around November of every year in several trailers loaded with cows, and take over the open lands, ponds and farmlands and barred indigenes from entering their land.

He said the herdsmen always arrive Uwheru in the night in a long convoy of trailers, shooting their AK-47 guns into the air as their trailers arrive the community, to warn locals of their presence and to stay away from the open lands and farms, which they subsequently occupy with their herds. According to him, the herdsmen leave at the beginning of the rainy season and return in November.



Okowa urges presidency to speak up on herdsmen menace

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Utso said Uwheru people now live in perpetual fear as the Fulani herdsmen had wreaked havoc in the kingdom in the past 12 years ranging from unwarranted assaults, raping of girls and women, and maiming to deaths. He disclosed that the problem with the herdsmen in Uwheru started in 2004 when Ohoro community of Uwheru was brutally invaded by Fulani herdsmen with active collaboration of soldiers and that many houses were razed down including the palatial residence of the then president general of the community, Emmanuel Eniwegha. During this attack, he said no fewer than 10 youths were killed, including one Edjerigho Eniwegha, the immediate younger brother of then president-general.

“Ohoro was like a floodgate that opened the way to further invasions of the entire Uwheru kingdom till date. Uwheru is peace loving people known world over as groundnut producers and majority of them also indulge in hunting, farming and fishing activities, but the brutal activities of the herdsmen has affecting these economic activities of the people and have thrown them into hunger” He explained that all efforts to contain the herdsmen, including bringing them to a roundtable discussion, was abortive. Reports and representations made to all government levels and the police over the years also yielded nothing.

Meanwhile, the consistent infiltration of Uwheru by heavily armed Fulani herdsmen have continued to create hardship, pains and difficulties for the harmless natives. The State Governor, Ifeanyi Okowa, had condemned the attack on Uwheru communities. He described the killing of innocent people in the affected communities as unwarranted

and wicked. According to him, the suspected herdsmen alleged to be aided by unidentified military personnel, were mindless.

“I, however, appeal to the affected communities to remain calm and peaceful. I commiserate with the communities and families on the unfortunate loss of their loved ones. I have directed the Commissioner of Police and the Brigade Commander, 63 Brigade, Nigerian Army, to rise to the occasion and bring the culprits to justice.”

Similarly, the publicity secretary of the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU), Abel Oshevire, said those that escaped the herdsmen’s bloody rampage had taken refuge in other communities. He said other Uwheru communities like Oreba, Owarovwo, Ophororo, Ohoro, Urede among others had constantly been victims of herdsmen attacks.

“These herdsmen are known to even demand for levies and protection money from our people in Uwheru, who are pursuing their legitimate livelihood of fishing and farming on their ancestral lands. Those who resist these demands have been known to be attacked, raped, maimed or killed by the wicked herdsmen. We are particularly worried at the allegations that on Saturday, the 15th of February, 2020, men in Military uniforms, allegedly on the side of the herdsmen, were deeply involved in this recent saga and shot sporadically at harmless citizens of Agadama-Uwheru, leaving some of them dead or gravely injured. The UPU urges the Federal and military authorities to investigate this allegation, with a view to bringing the security agents and herdsmen involved in this dastardly activity to book,” Oshevire said.

Before last weekend’s attack, Abraka had long been overwhelmed by the persistent attacks of armed herdsmen. Many people were reported killed in their farms. Farmers abandoned their farmlands, causing the astronomic rise in the price of staples like Garri and yam.

President-General of Abraka Kingdom, Emmanuel Idogho, had recently appealed to the state government to act fast and save the town from the onslaught of armed herdsmen. Idogho said he was grieved over how his people were being murdered gruesomely as a result of unprovoked attacks on them by the bloodthirsty hoodlums.

It would be recalled that on Wednesday, January 7, suspected herdsmen invaded Isele-Azagba, Aniocha South Council Area of Delta State, shooting sporadically, and killed an unidentified man and kidnapped a 17-year daughter of a teacher at Azagba Mixed Secondary School. Efforts of the community’s vigilance group that combed the entire forest in search of the victims and the herdsmen, was to no avail. The abductors later called to demand for N10 million ransom.

Just recently, a team led by the Senior Special Assistant on Security to the governor, Cassidy Iloba, dislodged about 1,000 herdsmen that had seized Oko Amakom Island in Oshimili South Council Area of the state. Speaking with The Guardian, the Akwe of Amakom, Nwamana Frank, expressed appreciation to the State government, Iloba and Special Assistant on Special Duties, Alhaji Mukhtar, for their gallantry.

“We now enjoy peace as the herdsmen were making life unbearable for our people. Not only will they destroy our crops and climb palm trees to drink our palm wine, they were also raping our women. People were scared from entering their farms since after the

rainy season in November last year when they invaded our farmlands. We pray they don't return again," he said.

As tempers flare over recent killings, hope for a peaceful coexistence between local residents of the State and the nomadic herdsmen appear at the moment to be dashed. Already, the Delta State Council of Traditional Rulers, after an emergency meeting of the council in Asaba, through its Chairman, Dr. Emmanuel Efeizomor II, described the attack as very provocative, warning that any further attack in any Delta territory by Fulani herdsmen would not be taken lightly.

The monarchs hailed the prompt response of the community's vigilante outfit and the police, which repelled the herdsmen. Also affected was the Abavo Kingdom, in Ika South Local Government Area, where the traditional ruler, Obi Uche Irenuma II, recently raised the alarm over the invasion of his kingdom by persons suspected to be Fulani herdsmen.

The monarch announced that two of his subjects had been kidnapped along the Obianiyima-Okpe Road. He also explained that tension had heightened in the community as a result of the activities of the herdsmen. The monarch further stated that yam barns owned by his subjects had been destroyed by the invaders, who allegedly cut tubers of yam to feed their cattle in addition to the destruction of other economic crops, including cassava, noting, "As a result of the herders' menace, my subjects have abandoned their farms for fear of being kidnapped, killed or raped.

"To forestall breakdown of law and order in the community, a stakeholders' meeting was held at my palace sometime ago, where it was agreed that peace and order should reign between the herders and the host community," he said. States in the South-South region have been struggling to contain clashes between sedentary farmers and herdsmen, whose militant posture have been source of concern to governments and people of the region.

For years now, the alarming activities of herdsmen had taken a toll on communities in Edo State. One of the worst hit is an agrarian community, Odiguete in Ovia North East Local Government Areas of the state. The Guardian gathered from sources in Odiguete that they have continuously appealed to government to beef up security in the community to save lives, particularly of the rural farmers who make up the large number of the community.

Recently, a farmer and a policeman were murdered by herdsmen in Owan community, still in the aforementioned local government. The youths of the community said they had called in the police to help retrieve the body of the farmer from the herdsmen. And it was in the process of trying to retrieve the remains that the herdsmen, who have been accused of being in possession of small arms that embolden them to intimidate, rape female farmers, and engage in highway robbery, fired at the policemen on a rescue mission, and killing one of them in the process.

In the same vein, an undergraduate was reportedly killed by herdsmen at Ugboha, a rural community in the state. About 12 people, who sustained various degrees of injuries, were hospitalised at the Benin Central Hospital, and other private hospitals. The incident at Ugboha occurred when the deceased identified as Collins Ojierakhi, and his friends were on their way back to the village from Uromi,

headquarters of Esan North East Local Government Area, according to the father of the deceased student, Festus Ojierakhi.

“I am just confused. I was actually in the house resting at about 8 p.m. and I started asking about my son who was not there. I was told he went to Uromi with his friends on a motorcycle. It was around 9 p.m. that the mother of my son’s friend started shouting, crying that herdsmen have killed her son. I rushed out of the house and I asked about my own son. I was told he died too with his friend.



Herdsmen kill man, shoot daughter, abduct wife in Delta community

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“We immediately detailed boys and ran to the place. When we got there we were told that the police had come to take the corpse to Ubiaja mortuary. I was told that my son and two others, including the friend died. They said the other person that died is an Igbo person. The information we heard was that as my son was driving home on his motorcycle, the herdsmen and their cattle blocked the road and they waited for them to leave the road. Immediately they passed, some of their people in the bush opened fire at my son and his friends and they died on the spot,” he said.

But the Edo police spokesman, DSP Chidi Nwabuzor, said the policeman did not die in the said attack. A brother to the farmer was also hit by bullets fired by the herdsmen. The killing made the community members to block the Benin-Akure highway in protest and sought government’s attention to the crisis.

One of the protesters, who gave his name as Moses, said herdsmen in the bush had been killing and raping women in their community. Moses said crops had been destroyed by the herdsmen.

“They killed our person in the bush. We called in the police so that we can retrieve the body but they attacked again and killed a policeman. The government should come to our aid. Herdsmen are terrorising us. We need help so that we can go to our farms.” Farmers at Igbanke community in Orhionmwon local government of the State have also not been spared in the gruesome killings as the farmers have also protested destruction of the crops by herdsmen.

The farmers, who had protested to Benin City said they could no longer enter their farms owing to activities of killer herders. They alleged that yams, cassava and other crops cultivated were used to feed cows after which the farmlands are set ablaze by the herdsmen to enable fresh grass to grow.

An elder of Iganke, James Iguando, said: “We are afraid. We cannot take laws into our hands. We don’t have plantain, yams and others again. We are now hungry. Herdsmen take their cows to eat our produce.” On the killings perpetrated by herders, some medical practitioners in the State have been under attacks, with the most recent the killing of the chairman of Medical Advisory Council of the Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospitals Complex, Ile Ife, Osun State, Prof. Jerome Elusiyan.

Elusiyan, who was attacked and killed by suspected herdsmen in Edo State was a professor of Paediatrics and Child Health. He was in the state to supervise a final year students’ examination of the Ambrose Alli University (AAU) when he was attacked between Ekpoma and Iruekpen in Edo State. Another medical doctor with the University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH) identified as Dr. Ehidiamen Oaikhena, was gruesomely killed in the Ovia North-East Local Government Area of Edo State.

He was said to have been shot by the suspected herdsmen in the Okada area, while returning to Benin City, the Edo state capital. It was gathered that Oaikhen, aged 34, was returning from a hospital where he had conducted a successful surgery when he ran into an ambush by the suspected herdsmen in 2019.

A pastor, Pius Eromosele, attached to the Church of God Mission (CGMi), in Benin City was not too long ago killed in Odighi community in Ovia North-East council by suspected herdsmen.

The pastor was said to have been allegedly killed by the herdsmen after a demand for the sum of N4 million from him was not met, and his corpse found in a shallow grave in his farm. His decomposing body was later discovered when hunters and vigilante members went into the bush in search of the pastor.

Eldest son of late Pastor, Dr. Richard Eromosele, said his father was abducted in his farm and his remains were found already decomposing in the bush. According to him, “the killers cut through my father’s skull after they shot him at close range.” The herdsmen did not use their phones. They were using my father’s phone and a phone of one of his workers. They demanded for N4 million but we begged them that it was a holiday and could not raise such money.

“I went to the police and they told me that I should call them whenever the herdsmen called for ransom payment. I did that but there was no response from the police. The two workers that escaped told us that the herdsmen told my father that he was one of those killing their cows.

“It was after the police failed to find my father that I begged hunters and vigilante to help me. It was during the search that we found my father. His skull was cut out with a cutlass, while his hands were also cut. We want security agencies to protect farmers in Odighi. My father has farmed in that place for many years. How could I go into farming when my father was killed like a common pig,” Eromosele said.

Members of the University Community in the State have not been spared in the onslaught by herders as a lecturer at Igbinedion University, Okada (IUO) in Edo State, identified as Mr. Kelvin Izebeokhai, was also killed by suspected herdsmen operating near Okada junction, along the Benin-Lagos Highway. The institution’s spokesperson, Jide Ilugbo, who lamented the killing of one of its academic staff, said the late Kelvin was a First Class graduate and was employed in the university three years ago.

Akwa-Ibom State had not been insulated from the deadly conflict between herdsmen and farmers which has continued to cause social upheaval across country.

Between August and September 2019, the State witnessed two major attacks in Ukanafun and Mkpato Enin local government councils. Although, there has not been any attack afterwards, the government, respective communities, are not resting in their oars to guide against any upsurge of the nefarious activities of herdsmen, especially now that there are reports of such heinous acts in some states in the South-South states. When the killing by the herdsmen happened in the state then, Senior Special Assistant to the governor on Security Matters, Capt. Iniobong Ekong (rtd), described the incident as unfortunate.

“But I must tell you that they are not anywhere near those things that they are calling herders/farmers invasion. In interpersonal issues you cannot rule out aggression. But we are cautious to prevent a misinterpretation, and we are conscious to ensure that we don’t allow a situation where it becomes a people against a people.”

Speaking on the renewed attacks on people around the South-South zone, a farmer in Ikot Ekpene, who refused his name in print, said with farming season at hand, government should be proactive by putting legislation in place so as to regulate the activities of herdsmen in the state. According to him, vigilante groups should be formed and recognized by government in farming communities, so that, they would help check the activities of herdsmen in damaging peoples farms.

“I think government should not wait till what is happening to other states happen to us before we start putting security measures in place. We need to be proactive, we must not wait until they over run the state; we can have vigilante groups to guide our communities. We can even make laws that will guide the activities of herdsmen. If we want to restrict them to a particular area to carry out their rearing activities is better; other states are doing it and that could be de through legislation.

“This is farming period we will certainly have issues with them once their animals continue to go on their own. Again, it is not only the Fulani people that are in the business, most Akwa Ibom people have developed the habit of rearing cattle in many communities, so it is not only about the Fulanis. Any law put in place should be holistic so that, indigenes doing the business will be culpable should they go against the law.”

On his part, Executive Director, Foundation for Civic Education, Human Rights and Development Advancement, Clifford Thomas, suggested that the state government should take a census of herdsmen in the state so as to be able to monitor their activities at all times. “The state government should take a census of nomadic herdsmen, understand the locations they are and monitor their movement from one point to another. The state has large portion of farmland so it needs to have effective means of monitoring. Government should have meeting with the Hausa/Fulani community in the state because they move in mostly at night. Their numbers ad locations are not known, they used their brothers that push carts to carry weapons mostly at night, they are building up in the state,” Thomas said.

A community leader in Ibiono Ibom local government council, Effiong Antia, said with the new law being canvassed by the State House of Assembly on Vigilante Groups registration, would help harmonise their activities and help them work hard to stemmed the tide of these herdsmen, especially in the rural areas.

According to Antia, once the bill is passed into law, it would give communities the ability to work together so as to check the activities of herdsmen who always carry out their nefarious activities of killing and destroying properties at night. Sometimes in 2017, about 10 people were allegedly killed in Obio Usiere in Eniong Abatim, Odukapni local government area of Cross River State by Fulani herdsmen.

Community sources said herdsmen usually invade the area during the dry season to feed their cattle. The attack on Obio Usiere, had forced residents to desert it, and caused women to abandon their farms because they fear they might be raped. Similarly, two



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people were killed in 2017 in Afam community in Oyiibo Government Areas in Rivers State by herdsmen.

The victim of the herdsmen had challenged the herdsmen who were grazing on his farmland in Afam uku. Amid the altercation, he was killed by the herdsmen, who also abducted his wife. In a bid to escape through a community in Tai, they also killed another farmer and took his wife away.

This incident had caused irate Oyiibo youths to issue a 72 hours to all herdsmen to leave the entire Oyiibo or risk a reprisal attack. Rivers State Governor, Nyesom Wike, has meanwhile declared that the state government would not support any settlement scheme for herdsmen in the state.

“Like I said, Rivers State will not participate in any settlement programme for herdsmen by whatever name it is called. I speak as the Governor of Rivers State. If they want water for the cattle, they can lay pipes from the Bonny Ocean to the far north for the Cattle. That is what we can contribute. We don’t have lands for any settlement scheme. Our land is for commercial agriculture,” he said.

Recently, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) has threatened to launch a fierce attack on Fulani herdsmen should they attack any Ijaw community in the Niger Delta. IYC president, Eric Omare, had directed setting up a rapid response team to respond to event of any attack on any Ijaw community by herdsmen. He stated that the Ijaw people and other Niger Delta communities need to take proactive steps to avoid a repeat of Fulani herdsmen attacks in Benue, Plateau, Enugu and some other parts of the country.

“The Ijaw people would not attack visitors in their communities including Fulani herdsmen but if Ijaw people and communities are attacked, we would have no option than to retaliate,” he said.

In Bayelsa State the issue of clashes between herdsmen and farmers was almost at a boiling point until the Bayelsa State Government, in July last year, donated 1,200 hectares of land to herdsmen, for grazing, ranching and slaughtering of their cattle in the state.

The state government had earlier announced the restriction of the activities of herdsmen in the state to the Bayelsa Palm area in Yenagoa, the state capital, saying its decision was to prevent the invasion of farmlands and check any security breaches. Before the decision to donate the land at the Bayelsa Palm, there were some issues of clashes between farmers and herdsmen cattle destroyed crops and farms in some Bayelsa communities.

For several weeks before the donation and restriction order by the state government the seeming menace posed by the rampaging herdsmen and their cattle has resulted in several confrontations with farmers in several parts of the state. Most of the flashpoint include Gbarantoru, Tombia, Agudama and Bumoundi to Akaibiri, Bumoundi-Gbene and Ikibiri communities locate in Ekpetiama, Yenagoa Local Government Area of the state.

The farmers had carried out peaceful protests over the incessant invasion and attacks on their on their farms and to notify the authorities, but it was the mainly non-

governmental organisations that brokered peace between the farmers and the herdsmen before the state governor's intervention. Former Governor Dickson also issued the restriction order, saying the measure had become imperative in view of the recent upsurge in violence and criminal activities of some cattle rearers in some parts of Nigeria. He had also warned cattle rearers against bearing arms in the course of grazing their livestock, threatening that anyone caught with weapons would be dealt with in accordance with the law.

