

INEC under pressure to remain upbeat as violence mars 2023 countdown

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Permanent Voter Cards (PVC) ready for distribution at the INEC AMAC office in Abuja... yesterday. PHOTO: OLAOYE SADIQ

- **Three gunmen, two policeman killed in attack on commission's Imo office**
- **It's systemic, targeted attack, says INEC**
- **Assault politically contrived, says Uzodimma, insists polls will hold in state**
- **PDP campaign office destroyed in Gombe**

After several affirmations that its resolve to hold next year's general elections would not be shaken, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was compelled, yesterday, to issue yet another assurance, as attacks on its facilities continued across the country.

Gunmen in Owerri, Imo State capital, yesterday, engaged police in a gun duel to gain access to the state INEC headquarters, located on Port Harcourt Road, and set the facility ablaze.

State Commissioner of Police, Mohammed Ahmed Barde, disclosed that three of the arsonists were killed, while a policeman also lost his life during the incident.

But INEC's Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC) in Jigawa State, Prof. Muhammad Lawal Bashar, declared that no amount of threat would deter the Commission from holding hitch-free polls in 2023.

"Upon all threats of burning our state offices, here and there, INEC has prepared adequately in provision of materials, security, and is battle ready," Bashar said.

Attacks on INEC facilities, however, are fast becoming a worrisome precedent, with National Commissioner and Chairman, Information and Voter Education Committee, Festus Okoye, describing the latest incident as "systematic".

"This is third attack on the Commission's facilities in Imo State in less than two weeks, following the earlier attacks on our Orlu council office on Thursday, December 1 and Oru West council office on Sunday, December 4, 2022.

"Our Imo State headquarters is located in the centre of Owerri, the state capital, between a court and the state secretariat. This is, therefore, yet another systematic attack targeted at the Commission's assets across the country, more so, on the day that the collection of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) commences nationwide ahead of the 2023 general election," Okoye said in a statement.

Okoye explained further that the attack affected the part of the building occupied by the Election and Party Monitoring (EPM) Department and that one official utility vehicle, a Toyota Hilux pickup van, was burnt.

He said: "The Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC) for Imo State, Prof. Sylvia Uchenna Agu, has reported that our state headquarters office in Owerri was attacked by unknown gunmen. The incident occurred at about 3.00 a.m., today (yesterday), Monday, December 12, 2022.

"The response of the security and emergency services (the Fire Service) curtailed further damage to the building and other assets of the Commission.

“No critical election materials were destroyed. There were also no casualties involving staff of the commission.” The state Commissioner of Police disclosed that the gun duel that lasted for an hour kept many residents awake throughout the night also and killed two policeman.

Speaking to newsmen at the command headquarters in Owerri, where the lifeless bodies of the hoodlums were paraded, the spokesperson of the command, Michael Abattam, said five rifles, two vehicles, charms, locally made bombs, phones and money were recovered from the slain gunmen.

Abattam said: “They attacked the INEC headquarters in Owerri, around 3:00 a.m. They threw bombs at the roof of the INEC building but unfortunately for them, our men who were guarding the place resisted them. They came in four vehicles and were fully armed.

“While they engaged our men on ground, we reinforced. Noticing that we were stronger, they ran away, abandoning one of their vehicles. We gave them a hot chase towards the Onitsha Road. Fortunately, we neutralised three of them. Others escaped with bullet wounds. Unfortunately, one of our men paid the supreme price.”

The Guardian gathered that four members of the armed gang were apprehended, while effort to nab others has been intensified. Reacting, the state governor, Hope Uzodimma, described the attack as the “handiwork of detractors”, reinforcing his earlier statements that insecurity in the state is politically contrived.

He insisted that those masterminding insecurity in the state are afraid of the outcome of the forthcoming elections and assured that nothing would stop the conduct of the polls in the state.

ALSO, unidentified persons, suspected to be political thugs, set ablaze the campaign office of the Gombe State Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) governorship candidate, Alhaji Jibrin Barde.

This came barely 48 hours after the state governor, Alhaji Muhammadu Yahaya, flagged off his re-election campaign. The Guardian learnt that the arsonists numbering about 30 arrived the office and scared off the two unarmed policemen on guard.

The office, located at the Government Reserved Area (GRA), had had its fence demolished recently by the State Urban Planning and Development Authority (GOSUPDA), which claimed the land was approved for residential purposes alone.

The state police command, meanwhile, has ordered an immediate investigation into the incident. Police Public Relations Officer, Mahid Muazu Abubakar said: “The Commissioner of Police has directed discrete investigation into the circumstances surrounding the incident and perpetrators will not go scot-free.”



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