

12-year-old girl killed in operatives-kidnappers' duel in Edo

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Governor Monday Okpebholo

•Chief Imam kidnapped in Uromi

•State establishes special anti-kidnapping, anti-cultism squad

Edo State Police Command has confirmed the death of a 12-year-old girl during an exchange of gunfire between security operatives and fleeing kidnappers along the Fugar-Agenebode road in Etsako East Local Council of the state.

The Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), CSP Moses Yamu, in a statement yesterday, disclosed that the tragic incident occurred on Friday evening when armed men, suspected to be kidnappers ambushed commuters and blocked the highway about 7.20 p.m. Yamu said two persons were killed on the spot by the attackers, while others were abducted and taken into the forest.

Responding to a distress call, operatives of the police from Agenebode, in collaboration with local vigilantes and hunters, launched a swift rescue operation.

According to the police spokesperson, during the operation, a gun duel that ensued between the kidnappers and the rescue team at Obe Hill resulted in the fatal shooting of the young girl.

“Unfortunately, a 12-year-old girl was fatally shot by the fleeing kidnappers during the crossfire. One female victim is still unaccounted for, and search efforts are ongoing to ensure her safe return,” he added. He said the Commissioner of Police in the state, Monday Agbonika, commended the bravery of the joint security operatives and reassured the public of the command’s commitment to restoring peace and bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Also, the Chief Imam of Uromi and President, Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Edo-Delta Chapter, Murtadho Muhammad, was reportedly kidnapped, yesterday.

The sheikh was said to have been abducted at the Angle 90 Area of Uromi, Esan North East Local Council of the state around 2.00 p.m. Witnesses revealed that Muhammad stepped out to buy food for his family near his residence shortly after he observed one of the daily prayers when he was forcefully taken away.

Chairman, Edo chapter of Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Abdulazeez Igbinidu, confirmed the incident to newsmen, yesterday. Igbinidu condemned the inglorious act and demanded the unconditional release of the Islamic leader.

“I hear that they are asking for a very big amount of money and we don’t have such. Even if you have, if you do such a thing, you are encouraging them,” he said.

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A family source told journalists that the suspected kidnappers demanded a ransom of N30 million. The PPRO, who confirmed the incident, said efforts are ongoing to rescue the victim and track down the culprits.

Meanwhile, Governor Monday Okpebholo has approved the establishment of a Special Security Squad aimed at flushing out kidnappers and cultists terrorising the state due to the resurgence of cult-related violence and killings in the state.

This was disclosed in a statement by Chief Press Secretary (CPS) to the Governor, Fred Itua, in Benin. According to him, the new operation, entitled ‘Operation Flush Out Kidnappers and Cultists’, is a strategic initiative by the Office of the Principal Security Officer (PSO) to the Governor and will be coordinated jointly by the PSO and the Chief Security Officer (CSO) at the Government House.

“Edo State has grappled with worsening security challenges, especially in the form of rampant cultism and targeted kidnappings. The most affected areas have included Benin City, Ekpoma, Auchi, and environs, with reports of daylight abductions, cult-related killings and extortion by criminal gangs.

“This state of insecurity has led to the exodus of investors, disrupted local economy, and left residents living in fear.

“Since assuming office, Governor Okpebholo has made security a priority. One of his earliest declarations was the intention to offer amnesty to repentant cultists, encouraging them to turn a new leaf and contribute to society,” he said.

The statement added that the squad would consist of a carefully profiled and recruited team of able-bodied men, including repentant cultists, hunters and vigilantes, who would form local squads within each council, ensuring community involvement and swift operational response to security threats.

“To facilitate the operation’s mobility and effectiveness, the request notes that vehicles and motorcycles will be deployed for patrol and tactical operations.

“This initiative is not without precedence. In 2016, a similar civilian anti-cult group was launched in Ekpoma, which significantly reduced cult violence and kidnappings in the area,” he said.