

Benin Explosion: A Fresh Security Puzzle

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The explosion that shattered the tranquility of Ezena street tucked into a cluster of some four adjoining streets in the Ugbor area in GRA, Benin city last Tuesday has opened up new dimensions of thinking on the hydra-headed issue of perennial insecurity in Edo state. Viewed against the Bayelsa explosion that preceded it and the one that occurred in Asaba, Delta state shortly after it, it appears that nobody needs any gift of exceptional spiritual insight in forecasting that if nothing is done firmly, the Niger Delta could be more than bloody during the 2007 general elections.

The blast, which tore through the area physically on that fateful day vibrated heavily in buildings located some two to three kilometers from Ezena street. Some shattered parts of a Mercedes car destroyed beyond recognition were catapulted to nearby buildings whose roofs and ceiling boards were destroyed. For instance, Mr. Moses Obasuyi's house on No. 1 Obasuyi street is about 500 meters from the scene of the explosion—No. 1. Ezena street. But a heavy chunk of severed metal shot from the blast had landed on a roof there, tore through it and landed on the floor. Again, at No. 3 Obasuyi street, the bumper of the said most shattered Mercedes car was seen rested on top of a building in the compound.

The other buildings heavily impacted by the blast outside the one-storey building devastated at originating point are the ones located on two compounds—Nos. 6 and 7 Obasuyi street and owned by Mrs. Queen Ughulu. The ceiling boards, parts of the roofs and window glasses caved in as the explosion menaced

the vicinity. Of course, one very outstanding feature of the tragic incident was the stampede it caused in the adjoining streets.

One of the gatemen on No 3 Obasuyi aforementioned identified himself as Yakubu from Nasarawa state. Asked what happened when the explosion occurred, he spoke in passable English, saying, "I run well. How I no go run? The thing too much." He had along with other persons in the compound run through one un-tarred road opposite the compound and only came back when the hurly-burly was gone.

Miss Imade Osifo is a student of the University of Benin and she was at No. 6 Obasuyi; when the incident occurred. She said, "we ran because the noise, the explosion, the impact actually broke the glasses around us and it was not safe. At first, we thought it was a gas explosion but we came back to find out it was a bomb."

Relating her experience, Mrs Ughulu said, "I was taking my bath when I heard a blast and I rushed out of my bathroom and called on my children but none of them answered. So, as I wanted to turn back to take my clothes and wear, then the ceiling board started falling on me and I started praying before I heard one of my daughters calling me and I ran outside to see her and others outside the compound."

Richard Ehimigbai is an accountant and also a politician from the Owan area of the State. He has been preparing the ground to begin his campaign to actualize his ambition to become the next chairman of Owan East council area, his home local Government area. No. 2 Ezena street where the tragic explosion occurred, killing his relation, Godwin Aigbekhai, in his private residence in Benin City. He

was the first to narrate the account of the incident to newsmen about an hour after the explosion.

The encounter went thus:

What is your name?

Richard Ehimigbai

Are you a politician?

Yes, I am

Which party do you belong to?

I belong to PDP.

Are you contesting for any position?

Yes, I am contesting for the chairmanship of Owan East Local government in the next local government council election.

So, what happened here this morning?

I was just brushing my teeth upstairs when I heard that blasting noise. That was around 8.30 am. I ran down stairs to find out what happened and I met the whole thing shattered as you can see.

Are you quarrelling with anybody?

No, we don't have any serious quarrel with anybody.

Can you give us more details of what happened as you came downstairs?

As I rushed downstairs with wrapper on my waist, I found the whole place shattered.

Which other persons were in the house?

My wife was there, my driver, one other boy and another boy who died in the blast.

Can you give the name of the boy that died?

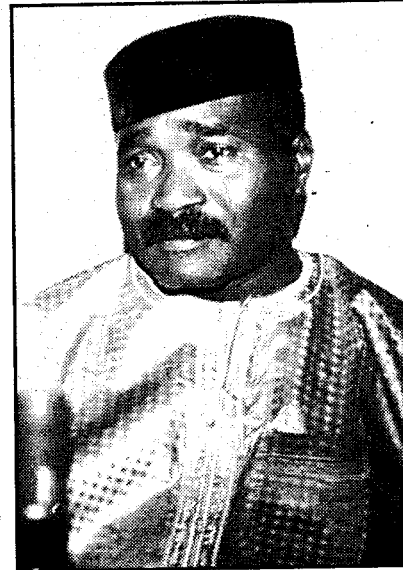
Godwin Aigbekhai.

Was he a tenant?

He wasn't a tenant; he came visiting yesterday from Port Harcourt.

Ehimigbai explained further that the deceased came from Port Harcourt on Monday with some six cars, which he sells. He said he has been bringing cars like that for sale.

The deceased's younger brother, Barnabas wept uncontrollably as he



• Governor Lucky Igbinedion

narrated the incident that consumed his only brother. He could have been equally killed in the blast but for that he had gone to open the gate for the deceased who was getting ready to drive the cars out of the compound. The whole side view wall of the building covering part of the living room collapsed under the smash of the explosion.

Yet, the incident proven by the police to be explosion believed to be bomb has remained a big riddle, which has deepened the apparent political disequilibrium in the state.

An Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) and the Benin police Area commander, Isaac Eke said, "From what the owner of the house has said he is a politician. The man who brought in these vehicles last night is a relation and this morning this explosion happened. So, anything could happen. There could be a lot of analysis from this. For now, one cannot ascertain what the

real cause of this explosion is." Eke spoke shortly after the men of the bomb disposal unit of the state police command finished their preliminary on-the-spot assessment of what happened.

Some of the vehicles destroyed in the blast include a Mazda salon car marked AE 29 AKA (Edo), Honda civic car with number DH366BEN (Edo), two Mercedes Benz cars (200) marked AV 432 DKA (kaduna) and CE 939 BEN (Edo) respectively and a BMW car with number PM 804 KJA (Lagos) among others. One of the cars was crushed beyond recognition raising suspicion that the explosive, which resulted in the blast, could have been planted under it.

The incident coupled with a similar occurrence in the neighboring Delta in a quick succession has sent a certain danger signal to those who operate on the present rugged political terrain in both states. Consequently, shortly before Governor Lucky Igbinedion was ushered into the chamber of the State House of Assembly last Wednesday to present his 2007 budget proposal to the legislators, the issue of the blast was presented on the floor of the House by its leader, Hon. Patrick Obahiagbon. He expressly raised an alarm to the effect that if the incident is not thoroughly investigated with all seriousness, the political environment will be in for very horrible bloody incidents, especially as the coming elections come afoot.

At the end of the deliberations on the motion he presented under matter of urgent public importance, speaker of the House, Hon. Friday Ifulah led the State Assembly in calling on security operatives handling the matter to leave nothing untouched in carrying out their investigations into the incident.