

## Akwa Ibom community under the siege of Fulani headsmen

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DURING my one year (compulsory) National Youth Service Corps at Government Secondary School, Koko, Koko Besse Local Government Area of Kebbi State, I observed that goats, cows, sheep had their mouths muzzled while being taken to and from grazing lands, so that they won't eat along the way until when they get to the designated grazing areas. Incidentally, when the same Fulani herdsmen come down south, they graze their cattle any where and every way. They forgot that the farm crops are as important to the farmer as their cattle were to them.

In my village and the other villages surrounding the Shelter Afrique Estate in Uyo Akwa Ibom State, the villagers have stopped farming because it is a useless venture, a waste of time and resources. All the crops planted are deliberately destroyed by Hausa Fulani Cattle rearers, who leave their cattle to feed on cultivated farmlands. And the heartless herdsmen are quick to harass and intimidate the farm owners and this they do with the connivance of the police and other security agencies, especially those controlled by men and officers of Northern Nigeria extract. They arrest the locals for asking the cattle rearers to leave their farmlands but do not arrest the Fulanis for trespass and wilful destruction.

On Sunday, December 15, 2013 after indigenes and residents of Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono in Uyo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State have left for their various churches for Sunday service, two trailers load of cows arrived in the village about noon and hundreds of cattle were discharged into the village farmlands and the hungry cattle descended on crops planted by the villagers. Soon words went



• Late Ofonime

around the various churches that their farmlands are being devastated by cattle led by Fulani herdsmen. Some youths in the village were mandated to go and asked the cattle rearers to take their animals off the farmlands and their village as there are no grazing land there.

But the arrogant herdsmen brought out their cellphones and called some soldiers from a nearby army Barracks at Ibagwa in Abak; and soon two men suspected to be soldiers arrived on a motorcycle and when they met the herdsmen they disguised into cattle rearers dressing and confronted the unarmed Ikot Ekpeyak youths and in the ensuing arguments, sounds of automatic rifles

shots rented the air and heightened the temperature of the already tensed village. In an instant, one Ofonime Micheal Asukwo was shot dead by the supposed herdsmen. Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono is a boundary village between Uyo and Abak Local Government Area. The villagers identified the leader of the Fulani herdsmen as Shehu (Usman) Osuma. After killing Ofonime, the herdsmen tried to escape with their cattle through a neighbouring village Mbiabong Ikono towards Idoro and Itam axis before they were accosted by the Police.

The Villagers said that after killing Ofonime, the herdsmen came back the next day alleging that a ba-

sin of suya was found in one of the village farmlands and that a suya seller was missing, insinuating that the villagers might have killed him in retaliation for Ofonime's death.

Following the allegations, the Village Head Ikot Ekpeyak, Eteidung Enefiok Jacob Usanga, was said to have sent a town crier around the village asking that anyone who knows the whereabouts of the missing suya seller should report to the village council. The Villagers alleged that some soldiers came with the Fulani herdsmen and gave them an ultimatum that if the suya seller is not produced on or before December 18, 2013, the villagers would face dire

consequences.

President, Ikot Ekpeyak Youth, Mr. Gabriel Pius Iwok told Daily Independent that since this incident, the villagers have been living in fear of an invasion by the Fulanis or a mass arrest of the villagers by soldiers from Ibagwa. He declared as untrue and a cheap blackmail the allegation that a suya seller was missing in the village. Iwok said the allegation is a trump up excuse by the Fulani to attack Ikot Ekpeyak as well as justification for a mass arrest of the villagers by soldiers or police. According to Iwok, since the unfortunate incident most of the villagers have fled their homes to neighbouring villagers as the Fulanis boasted that the cattle are owned by a general and the Ibagwa Battalion are mandated to protect the cattle and the rearers. "We are scared, because we don't know what they will do. They have killed our son and destroyed our farmlands."

The youth leader stated that the December 15, invasion was a climax of about a year of planning and scheming by the herdsmen and some unknown soldiers from Ibagwa to turn their farmlands into grazing land. Iwok recalled that earlier in November, 2013, hundreds of cattle were brought and camped in the village by the Hausa Fulani cattle rearers, noting that the youths however chased the cattle to neighbouring Ikot Oku Ikono village, following which some soldiers came in two Hilux vehicles with some herdsmen to harass him in his house.

He added that in March 2013, some Fulani herdsmen attacked and matcheted a villager (Godwin Peters) on the allegation that a villager attacked one of the cattle. He alleged that since then Peters have been behaving abnormally and is yet to recover from the matchete cuts inflicted on him.

Iwok further said that soldiers came from Ibagwa and arrested some villagers based on an allegation by the Fulanis that one of the villagers matcheted a cow. He continued that one of the soldiers identified as RSM Inuwa Wada, volunteered to off set the medical bills of Peters on seeing the degree of injury inflicted on him. Iwok however lamented that since leaving the village, RSM Wada

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