

Herdsmen In Benue : Protests Trail Killing Of Two Catholic Priests, 17 Others

.Ortom Cuts Short Annual Leave .Attackers May Be Insurgents – Acting Gov .Several Killed In Nasarawa Attacks .Killings May Stoke Religious Conflict — Buhari .Senate May Summon Security Chiefs Over Killings .Says Govt Can't Leave Nigerians Helpless

By **Tor Vande-Acka, Innocent Oweh, Ahmed Musa** - April 25, 2018



Rev. Fr. Joseph Gor (left) and Rev. Fr. Felix Tyolaha, both killed in Benue attacks.

Makurdi / Abuja – There were protests in Benue following the fresh attacks by suspected Fulani herdsmen in another community of the state Tuesday morning.

Two Catholic priests and seventeen others were reported dead in the attacks.

The attackers, according to the state command of the Nigeria police, may have arrived the area about 5a.m. and laid in wait before striking.

The slain Catholic priests were Rev. Fr. Joseph Gor and Rev. Fr. Felix Tyolaha of St. Ignatius Quasi Parish, Ukpor-Mbalom, Gwer Local Government Area of the state.

Moses Iorapuu, Director of Communications, Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, confirmed the death of the two priests.

The attackers were said to have opened fire on Catholic worshipers during morning Mass. The worshipers were attacked about 5a.m. Other victims were said to have been killed during a burial ceremony later in the day.

Benson Abounu, the Deputy Governor who is also Acting Governor, told journalists in Makurdi that the tactics embarked on by the herdsmen was a pointer to the fact that they were insurgents and not herdsmen.

He stated this after a meeting with security agencies in his office.

Governor Samuel Ortom cut short his leave over the latest killings.

According to feelers, Ortom is expected to be in Makurdi before the week runs out.

He has been on leave since the beginning of the month.

Terver Akase, Chief Press Secretary (CPS) to the Governor, said in a statement on Tuesday: "Governor Samuel Ortom has cut short his vacation to return home and address the security challenge occasioned by the ongoing killing of Benue people by armed herdsmen.

"In the governor's absence, the Acting Governor, Engineer Benson Abounu, has done a commendable job," the statement read.

The killing, which had been described as one killing too many, raised tension in Makurdi, the Benue State capital immediately the corpses of the two priests arrived the mortuary of St. Theresa Catholic Hospital, Makurdi.

As soon as the corpses arrived, youths took over the town in protest but for the timely intervention of security agents in the state the situation would have been uncontrollable.

However, the intervention of security agents did not stop the closure of almost all commercial outlets in town.

Our correspondent who visited the modern market, Wurukum Market, bank road and the popular Katsina-Ala street saw that all business premises that earlier opened for the day were closed.

Unconfirmed reports claimed that some parts of the Makurdi modern market was torched by angry youths in the evening.

The situation may have degenerated into a mayhem if not for the patrol vehicles of the Nigeria Airforce on the Makurdi/Gboko Road.

Officers and men of the Nigerian Air Force were still on patrol on the Makurdi/Gboko road to check the activities of hoodlums as at 6.30pm.

Deputy Governor Benson Abounu described Tuesday as another black day in the state.

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He said: "Let me state categorically that this is another black day in Benue.

"I am saddened, the state governor who is on leave, is saddened, Benue people are very sad, because I can put it now that Benue is under siege.

"We have been attacked from all corners and this is unacceptable.

"What happened today was a calculated attack, well planned, and well executed.

"They (attackers) must have taken their time and they hit their target and they got what they desired to do.

"The police have been able to recover 16 corpses; one had earlier on been brought to Makurdi, and as I talk to you now, all the corpses have been brought to Makurdi, including the two Reverend Fathers killed right inside the church."

He added: "That is a new dimension of attacks because it has never happened before and, therefore, is very worrying."

"I also understand that we lost seventeen lives (apart from the two priests)."

Also speaking with newsmen, State Commissioner of Police, Fatai Awoseni, said: "After doing a wider coverage of the general area (including aerial surveillance), we also went to the church where this incident happened."

"That was where we were told on the spot that these attackers came by 5a.m, went into the church, and to the venue of a burial that was going on where the priest was supposed to officiate."

"These attackers came about thirty in number and the target was the priest and, of course, the venue of the burial."

"As at the time I left the place, we were able to see sixteen dead bodies, including the two priests that were killed."

"The police has taken over the corpses and we have deployed, and with the wider aerial coverage and surveillance we did, with the help of the people in the village, we were able to get into the bush to see if we can still lay hands on these people."

The Police Commissioner added: "We will intensify our search to go after these people wherever they may hide."

"We will also work on the information from the members of public there because we believe that they must have been hanging around the place to have committed the act at 5a.m."

"So, we still believe that they would be somewhere around there."

"These are armed marauders who are going about killing people and we will go after them with all the resources."

Several Killed In Nasarawa

Meanwhile, the police in Nasarawa State on Tuesday confirmed the occurrence of a communal clash between the Ebira and Bassa ethnic groups in Ugya village in Toto Local Government Area of the state where several people were killed.

DSP Kennedy Idirisu, the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) in the state, told newsmen in Lafia that the conflict was a spillover of the crisis in the neighbouring Kogi.

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"We received information about the crisis this morning and our findings revealed that the situation is a spillover of the crisis in Kogi over the weekend," he said.

Idirisu said although police could not ascertain any casualty figures as at press time, the police command was doing its best to contain the situation and avert bloodletting.

He said the Commissioner of Police in the state, Ahmed Bello, had directed the deployment of officers from the New Karu and Keffi Area Commands to strengthen the personnel already on ground in the area.

He called on the people of the area to refrain from taking laws into their own hands and seek redress over grievances through constituted authority.

Killings Stoking Up Religious Conflict, Endless Bloodletting — Buhari

President Muhammadu Buhari on Tuesday reacted to the latest killings in Benue State, insisting that the perpetrators of the crime were clearly making attempt to stoke up religious conflict and possibly plunge our communities into endless bloodletting.

Buhari, who learnt of the killing of some worshippers including two priests at a Catholic church in Ukpok-Mbalom community in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, reacted by describing the attacks as vile and satanic.

He expressed his condemnation through a statement authored by his media aide, Femi Adesina.

"I extend my sincere condolences to the government and people of Benue State, the Mbalom community, and especially the bishop, priests and members of the St Ignatius' Catholic Church, whose premises was the unfortunate venue of the heinous killings by gunmen.

"This latest assault on innocent persons is particularly despicable. Violating a place of worship, killing priests and worshippers is not only vile, evil and satanic, it is clearly calculated to stoke up religious conflict and plunge our communities into endless bloodletting," the president said.

Buhari noted that the country will not bow to the machinations of evildoers, adding that the assailants would be hunted down and made to pay for the sacrilege committed.

The killings came barely few days after an attack on Naka community, where two persons were feared dead and several houses burnt.

Benue State which is believed to be under siege by settling cattle herders have experienced unprecedented killings since January this year when the anti-open grazing policy took effect.

Senate May Summon Security Chiefs Over Killings

The Senate may soon invite security chiefs to the upper legislative chamber amidst worsening security challenges and looming humanitarian crisis in Zamfara and other affected states.

The lawmakers are disturbed that the killings in these states have not abated but were on the rise.

Senate President Bukola Saraki dropped the hint of the lawmakers' desire to hear from the security chiefs on Tuesday.

Saraki was reacting to the information that, over the weekend, no fewer than 34 people were killed in a village in Zamfara State by armed bandits, and another 50 killed in a communal clash between communities in Abia and Cross River states.

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Senator Kabiru Garba Marafa (APC, Zamfara Central) had raised a motion under matters of personal explanations, wherein he alerted the Senate to the fact that his constituency was losing people to the machinations of armed bandits.

He said, "Mr. President, I just want to bring to the notice of this Senate and the international community another sad incidence of killings in Zamfara.

"On the 21st day of April, precisely Saturday, last week, in a village called Obaru, Mr. President, the incident happened in the early hours of the morning and it left 34 killed, 12 people injured and 61 women widowed.

"The 34 people had 61 wives, a total of 113 children orphaned. So, Mr. President, that's the stark reality that has stared the people of Zamfara in the face," he said.

Marafa, who asked that the Senate observe a minute of silence in honour of the departed, also reminded his colleagues of a similar motion he brought last to the effect that Zamfara State, despite its dire need of relief material was left out in grain distribution by the Federal Government.

He added: "Last week I brought a motion where food items were distributed across the country and Zamfara State was missing, and this is part of the problems that I raised.

"And, in just one incident, we have 113 children orphaned and 64 women widowed. And from January to date, we have lost about 200 people and they all have wives and children."

Reacting to the revelation, Saraki, who presided over Tuesday plenary, noted that since the motion was under matter of personal explanation, there was no need to debate it.

Saraki said, "But I think we have to take a time where we need to review where we are regarding, whether there's more we can do as a National Assembly to assist these security agencies.

"And I think for us to be able to do that, they must create the enabling environment, they must come and tell us where these challenges are and what needs to be done.

"Because of time, I think when we adjourn till tomorrow; we need to come up with suggestions on how best, whether we are going to invite the relevant agencies to come before a full plenary in a closed door to really address what are these challenges.

"Because the manner and the daily occurrence are very disturbing, especially in this state, Zamfara, and others.

"And we cannot politicise it for one reason or the other as it is purely a security issue.

"And as a government which is responsible for protecting lives and property, we cannot fold our hands, we must find something concrete to do about this.

"And, if you will permit, we will look at it tomorrow and pick a date for this debate and presentation."

Comments

comments