

# As Insecurity In South East Escalates ... Gunmen Kill 37 Police Officers In 52 Attacks

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Gunmen have killed at least 37 police officers in 52 attacks on towns and communities in the South East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, checks by LEADERSHIP have revealed.

In no distant past, gangs of unknown gunmen have run riot in vast swathes of the South East region, with the security crisis snowballing into national prominence in the country.

The term "unknown gunmen" is a catch-all for the criminal gangs carrying out frequent bouts of attacks on police and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) facilities, killing and abducting citizens across that part of the country.

The criminals who are mostly suspected to be members of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) had in 2021 stepped up their attacks on the South East states despite military operations against their hideouts.

LEADERSHIP investigations showed that the worst hit is Imo where there have been over 30 attacks on police formations and personnel across the state.

Until April 5, 2021, Imo State was ranked one of the most peaceful in the country but all that changed after the attack on the Correctional Centre in Owerri, the state capital, where over 1,800 inmates were set free.

The gunmen alleged to be members of IPOB had on Easter morning broken into the Correctional Centre as well as the headquarters of the Imo State Police command and freed suspects, gunning down two military men at Umuiji junction along the Owerri-Onitsha expressway.

Of the 27 local government areas in Imo, the only divisions yet to experience an attack are Ohaji, Ngor Okpala, Ikeduru and Isiebu, while some of the local councils have been attacked more than thrice by arsonists.

Owerri North, Umuguma in Owerri West, Mbaitoli, Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise, Ihitte-Uboma, Isiala Mbano, Obowo, Ehime Mbano, Ideato North, Onuimo, Orlu, Orsu, Njaba, Oguta, and several others have experienced attacks on Police personnel and formations.

Other stations attacked since the security breach include the Obowo, Aboh Mbaise, Ihitte-Uboma, Isiala Mbano, Ehime Mbano, Mbieri, Arondizuogu, Oguta, Umuguma, Orji, Oru East divisions from February 2021 to date.

Gunmen also razed Ehime Mbano Police station, Mbieri, Oguta, Otoko, Umuguma, and Arondizuogu police stations.

According to data obtained by this paper, the gunmen on April 6, 2021 attacked the Ehime Mbano Police station and razed it, and two days after, on April 8, 2021, Mbieri Police station in Mbaitoli local government area was attacked.

Following a raid on IPOB's hideout in which one commander, Ikono, was killed, the country home of 12 state governor, Hope Uzodinma

was attacked in a reprisal, with two policemen killed at Mgbidi junction.

On April 26, 2021, five policemen were killed during an attack in Okigwe South police division in Ehime Mbano local government area by gunmen.

On November 23, 2021, gunmen killed one cop and razed the Arondizuogu police station while another sustained a battered head.

On February 1, 2022, a retired chief superintendent of police, Christian Kpatuma, was killed and beheaded in Mgbala community in Agwa-Oguta local government area by a suspected inmate escapee, Daberechi Chukwu.

On March 28, 2022, the gunmen attacked the Otoko police station in Obowo local government and fatally injured two policemen and razed the station.

On August 8, 2022, four policemen were killed and a commercial motorcyclist during the attack on Agwa Police division in Oguta council.

On November 7, 2022, a military man was allegedly gunned down in Izombe, Oguta local government area which attracted a reprisal and last month, on December, 2022, rampaging gunmen killed a policeman at 7up junction orji, in Owerri North during which an elder brother of Nollywood actor, Prince Osiatime was killed, while the commissioner for Solid Minerals, Martin Eke, was fatally injured.

On January 2, 2023, residents were jolted to the reality of insecurity in the region when gunmen ambushed a former governor of Imo State, Chief Ikedi Ohakim, and killed four policemen and a driver at Oriagu in Ehime Mbano local government area of the state.

Reacting to the development, Ohakim maintained that he survived because of his bullet-proof vehicle. The Imo State Police Command in 2022, suffered series of attacks by suspected IPOB/ESN members, resulting in the destruction of about seven police stations, ten deaths and six officers sustaining various degrees of injuries.

This was made known by the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), Michael Abattam while interacting with LEADERSHIP.

According to him, "On Sunday, February 20, 2022, armed men suspected to be members of the proscribed IPOB/ESN in their numbers went to the Isu Divisional police headquarters in two Toyota Sienna buses, a Toyota Camry car and an unspecified number of motorcycles.

"The hoodlums took advantage of the porous neighbourhood and attacked the station from the rear, shooting indiscriminately and throwing petrol bombs and IEDs that set the station ablaze.

"They raid led to the death of two police officer with the police in turn arresting 18 of the attackers," the PPRO revealed, adding that Otoko Divisional Police Headquarters was also attacked by hoodlums on 28 March, 2022.

He said, "On Monday, March 28, 2022, gunmen stormed the Otoko Divisional Police Headquarters in the



IGP Baba

Obowo local government area of Imo State, along Owerri-Umuahia road.

Armed men suspected to be members of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)/Eastern Security Network (ESN), its militia wing, came in their numbers from the rear of the division, which is an ungoverned forest, threw petrol bombs and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) that fell on the transit camp and a vehicle, shooting sporadically.

Three undetonated explosives, four pieces of expended ammunition, five live cartridges, 33 expended cartridges, two masks, one pump action gun and a motor saw machine were reportedly recovered from the gunmen. Minimal damage was caused to the transit camp, and a vehicle. Though no life was lost, a police operative sustained an injury.

He explained that Umuguma Divisional Police Headquarters was also attacked by suspected IPOB/ESN members.

According to him, "Gunmen in the early hours of Saturday, March 19, 2022 attacked and set ablaze the Umuguma Divisional Police Headquarters in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State, killing two police men."

Abattam stated that Omuma Divisional Police Headquarters came under attack in 2022.

"The attackers engaged policemen in a gun duel on arrival at the Omuma Divisional Police Headquarters. Four of the attackers were killed as policemen and the operatives of the Department of State Services engaged the gunmen in a gun battle."

The Police Command indicated that "gunmen in the early hours of Friday, April 1, 2022 invaded the Mbieri Divisional headquarters situated in the Mbaitoli local government area of Imo State.

"They arrived at Mbieri Divisional headquarters around 3am and opened fire on the police facility."

However, the police spokesperson for the command, Michael Abattam, stressed that they were repelled.

He noted that the petrol bombs the attackers threw at the police station affected parts of the roof, while one vehicle was torched in the incident.

He listed some of the incidents to include Izombie police station, Isiala Mbanopolice station and Nwauri police station where he said the various stations were attacked and burnt with loss of lives and injuries recorded.

Speaking on the way forward, the Program Director, Development Dy-

namics, Dr. Jude Ohanale, advised the federal government to approach the IPOB/ESN with carrot and stick.

He also called on the authorities to dialogue with them so as to find lasting solution to the security challenges confronting the nation.

Also, no fewer than 10 police officers were killed by hoodlums in Anambra State in 2022.

LEADERSHIP authoritatively gathered that during the period the hoodlums who generally operated with various sophisticated weapons, including AK 47 rifles, ammunition, Improvised Explosive Devices, IEDs, charms, attacked and destroyed facilities at six police divisional headquarters across the state.

One of gruesome killing of the police officers was recorded on April 13, 2022, when a gang of heavily armed hoodlums swooped on Atani police station in Ogbaru local government in the early hours of that day.

Before escaping from the police stations, they killed four police officers on duty and set the station ablaze.

The police public relations officer in the state, Ikenga Tochukwu, was not forthcoming on the records of officers and men of the command killed, the stations and facilities destroyed during the period.

Findings by LEADERSHIP, however, showed that in addition to the Atani killings, two other police officers were killed at Amukabia village, Achalla, headquarters of Awka-North local government area on July 16.

Tochukwu had, while confirming previous Atani attack, said two officers who were among a six-man police team on a recovery operation of a Toyota Sienna space wagon vehicle snatched at gunpoint at Oye-Agu, Abagana area, Njikoka local government area, were killed on July 9, 2022.

He stated that the police officers had gone on the operation with a civilian car-tracker expert, but the hoodlums at Amukabia, Achalla, on July 16, engaged the police team in a gun duel and succeeded in disappearing with two of the policemen whose deceased bodies were later found.

Tochukwu stated that the police team had recovered several weapons which the hoodlums abandoned to escape including, one AK-47 rifle, ammunition, charms, police beret, etc.

LEADERSHIP also gathered that the police command also lost another of its personnel to gunmen at a check point somewhere between Ihiala and Uli; along the Onitsha-Owerri Expressway on November 8.

The gunmen, sources revealed, were those enforcing the Monday sit-at-home earlier ordered IPOB in the entire South East zone, but which the group later suspended following the public outcry over the severe hardship on the people of the region.

Another police officer was also said to have been killed by gunmen at Utuh, Nnew-South local government area on May 2. The killers were also suspected to be carried out by a gang of hoodlums enforcing IPOB's suspended sit-at-home order.

Two police officers attached to Senator Ifeanyi Patrick Ubah repre-

sented Anambra South senatorial zone of Anambra State were among the five persons killed when gunmen

attacked his convoy in Enugu-Ukwu, Njikoka local government on Sunday, September 13, 2022.

Spokesperson of the police in the state while confirming the killing of the police officer said the other three victims were civilians.

The commissioner of police in the state, Mr. Echeng Echeng on behalf of the Inspector General of police, IGP, Usman Baba, had few days ago distributed cheques totalling about N43.2million to families of deceased police officers in the state under the Inspector General of police Insurance Scheme.

Speaking during the ceremony held at the state police command headquarters, PPRO Tochukwu said, "The (insurance) scheme is aimed at giving succour to the families of police officers who died in active service, and, at spurring officers to greatness while discharging their statutory duties with the assurance that their welfare is of paramount importance to the administration of the Force".

Meanwhile, the police stations and facilities attacked during the year, according to LEADERSHIP findings, included Ihiala police divisional headquarters in Ihiala local government area where the gunmen razed down on December 28.

Others are Amichi, Ezinifite and Osumenye police divisional stations respectively, all located in Nnewi-South local government area. The police stations were attacked by gunmen on April 1.

They were among those earlier destroyed by hoodlums during the EndSARS 2020 protests and were undergoing reconstruction when the hoodlums again stormed them and destroyed the facilities.

The gunmen were said to have destroyed the facilities just about 12 hours after the state governor, Prof Chukwuma Soludo, visited the local government headquarters, Ukpok, after the hoodlums attacked and destroyed the council headquarters.

The Ekwulobia police divisional headquarters in Aguta local government area of the state governor, Professor Chukwuma Soludo, was also destroyed during the year by hoodlums who launched attack on the facilities on March 19.

The station was also undergoing reconstruction having also being destroyed during the EndSARS 2020 protest when it was again attacked by the hoodlums.

Anaku police division station, according to LEADERSHIP findings, was also attacked by gunmen on April 20.

Though the deputy commissioner of police in charge of operations led a fierce police team and succeeded in chasing the hoodlums away, the gunmen before escaping, however, succeeded in throwing locally made explosives into the premises of the police station, destroying three operational vehicles in the station.