

Oil city erupts in violence over death of a student

He was a final year student of the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu. On July 22, the father of two took his brother's commercial motorcycle (a.k.a *Okada*) to make money. Three hours after leaving home, he was found dead at a police checkpoint in Warri, Delta State. The controversy over his death refused to die, reports SHOLA O' NEIL.

JULY 22 was a beautiful sunny day in the oil city of Warri. Residents turned out in large numbers to enjoy the rare warmth of the sun that took three weeks in coming after the seemingly endless 'siege' to the city by torrential rains that fell incessantly day and night.

Lucky Enaowho took out his elder brother's motorcycle, hoping to cash in on the mood to make some money. A few hours later, the final year student of the Institute of Management Technology (IMT), Enugu died at a police checkpoint on Upper Erejuwa Road in the heart of the city. Several questions were asked. They include:

Who killed Enaowho? Was he shot or beaten to death by the police as it was alleged by his family and fellow *okada* riders or did he suddenly slump and died? Two weeks after, the conundrum has not been unravelled.

The only thing that is obvious: Enaowho died at the police checkpoint. But in a city where rumour is a thriving industry, engaging over 80 per cent of a mostly jobless populace, filling the missing space was not so easy. There are several versions of the incident.

The first version was that the Eku-born student was shot at point-blank by the police after he refused to part with a N20 bribe.

A second version said that the rider was severely beaten by the policemen who used clubs, batons and several other cudgels on him. As *okada* riders cruised through the streets, they swapped the stories and speculators put in their own additives and the story got more interesting so much, barely five minutes after Enaowho died.

It was therefore not surprising that a few minutes after the rumour started, one of the bloodiest clashes between *okada* riders and policemen enveloped the town that once shot itself into the nation's psyche as a flashpoint of violence in the wake of the Ijaw/Itsekiri crises.

Irate *okada* riders, defiant

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and ready to die, went into the battle field. Their first victims were the offending policemen at the checkpoint where the incident occurred. Two members of the team were attacked. They are still in the hospital. Corporals Monday Omodigie and Emmanuel Okeim were clubbed, drubbed and abandoned in the pool of their blood.

A Peugeot 505 saloon car belonging to a senior police officer was vandalised and set ablaze by the rampaging riders, who enjoyed support from street urchins. By the time the cloud over the incident cleared late that night, over 100 persons, including innocent bystanders and uninformed policemen, had been injured.

The Divisional Police Officer (DPO) in charge of the "A" Division Warri, Mr. Chris Okoro, whose



•Police chief Udom

men were at the centre of the controversy, was one of the first to arrive on the scene. He told our correspondent that he was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the violence visited upon his men.

Okoro, a Superintendent of Police, lamented: "I saw two of my men in the pool of their blood and we had to rush them to the hospital. I had to buy many pints of blood in the battle to claw them out of the jaws of death".

According to Okoro, the deceased slumped at a point near the checkpoint, contrary to reports that Enaowho was killed by the police. He added that the presence of the police at the scene was merely to help revive him.

"I wonder where the report [that he was shot] came from because there was no sign of any physical wound, either bullet or cut, on his

body. The remains are still at the mortuary. Anybody can go there and see for himself and verify if this is true or not.

"After the incident, people even came to the station to report it. There were three persons who confirmed that the man slumped at a distance away from the checkpoint and two of them were *okada* riders", he added.

Expectedly, the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Udom Ekpoudom, reechoed Okoro's position, wondering why his men were made to bear the brunt of the mob action.

However, the father of the deceased and his wife were at the state-owned DBS TV, Warri, demanding justice over the death of their bread-winner.

Contradicting the police's version of the story, Mr. Enaowho challenged the Inspector Gen-

eral of Police, Mr. Sunday Ehindero, to ensure that his son's killers do not go unpunished.

The clarion call of the octogenarian easily touched the heart of those who watched the news programme on DBS, particularly against the background of Enaowho's widow sobbing nearby.

As the debate over how Enaowho who died that fateful Saturday rages, a post-mortem seems the only way out of the impasse.

Okoro, though, vowed that the police would only carry out the test in the presence of authentic representatives of the family and human rights groups, because of fear that "if we carry out the autopsy people would not accept it; they would say it has been doctored".

Meanwhile, Ekpoudom has redeployed the DPO in charge of Warri, Mr. Abel Edibogi, under whose jurisdiction the incident occurred, to Asaba. The redeployment has added a new dimension to the already intricate drama. For, although the Lower Erejuwa area, where the incident occurred, is covered by his command, the men at the centre of the controversy were from 'A' Division, Warri.

As if this is not complicated enough as it is, our correspondent recalled that Edibogi was the DPO of 'A' Division before he was redeployed by Ekpoudom to rural Bomadi and then 'B' Division Warri. Ekpoudom claimed last year that Edibogi was removed from the powerful 'A' Div. for allegedly sleeping on duty.

Police spokesperson Miss Olabisi Okuwobi (DSP) told our correspondent that Edibogi's transfer was "an internal reshufflement", adding that she was not aware that it was in connection with the *okada* police clash in the oil city.

The saga continues, even as the spirit of the deceased is crying out for its resolution so his remains would be taken out of the Warri Central Hospital and laid to rest.