

NEWS

Okija plays unwilling hosts to soldiers, policemen

THERE is anxiety in Okija, in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State following the arrival in the town of some 200 soldiers and policemen. They came after the crisis in the town, about three weeks ago.

The indigenes are quarrelling over the kingship of the town which came into prominence in the days of former governor, Dr Chris Ngige.

They have blamed the king-makers in the town for the renewed crisis, advising that they should leave the leadership of who occupies the royal throne in the town for peace to return.

But the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) in charge of Criminal Investigation Department in the state, Mohammed Musa Katsina, told *The Nation* at the weekend that peace had already returned to the troubled town since security men were deployed.

About three weeks ago, the town which has been in the news for the past two years over the celebrated Okija shrine saga, erupted again, when youths believed to have constituted themselves into local vigilante went on the rampage when one of them was killed by unknown persons. They injured many people.

It was gathered that before that time, petitions from some of the elite from the town had flooded the state police command over extortion of money from innocent individuals by the vigilante group, who, it was gathered, threatened the lives of anybody who failed to give them money.

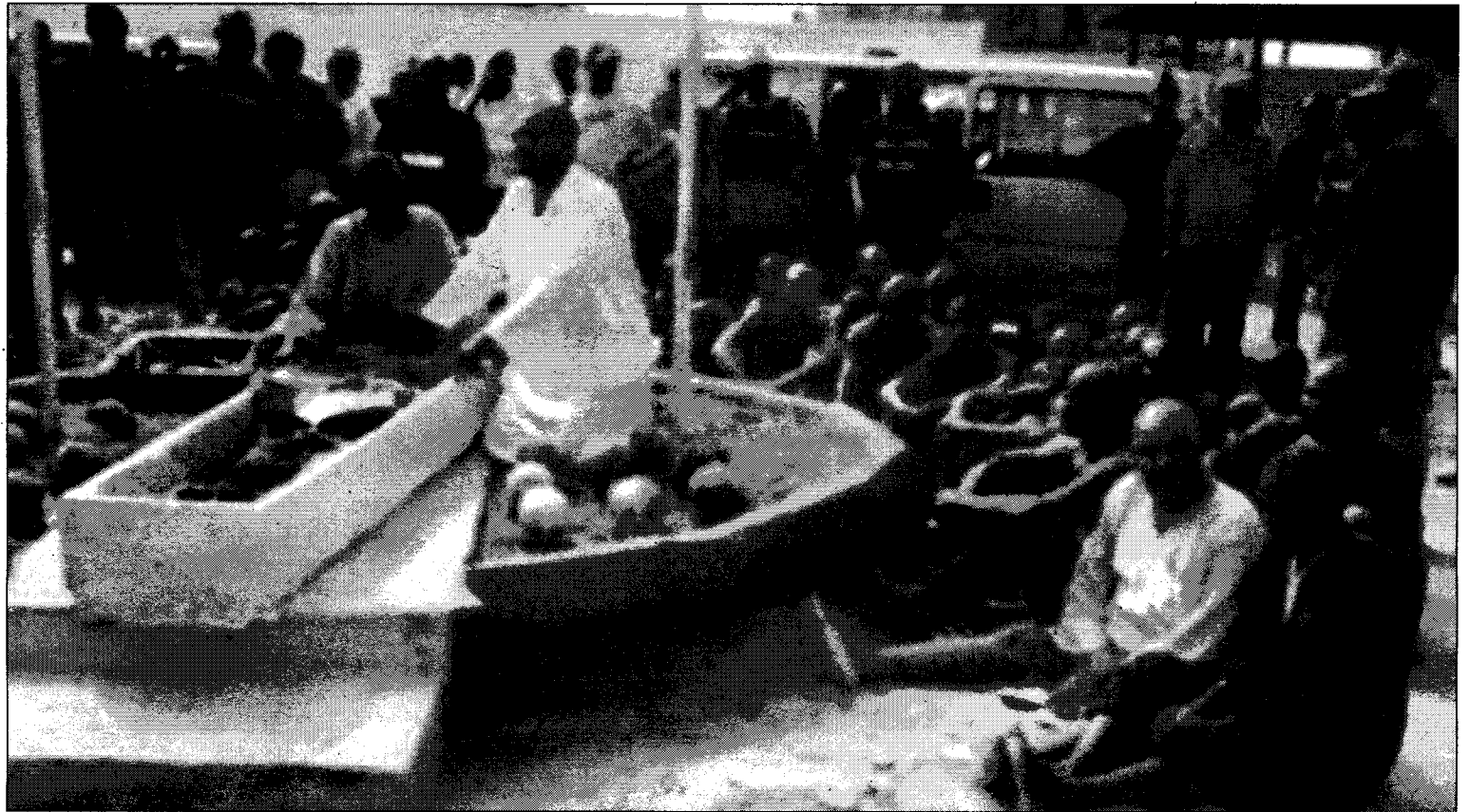
Furthermore, those engaged in the vigilante services were said to be the dislodged members of the dreaded Ogwugwu Okija shrine who saw it as another avenue to earn a living. They chased out the former members of the local vigilante on account that they were not doing their job properly.

The group was embraced by the people, according to investigation, but there was trouble when they started co-opting some boys from the dreaded Umuleri/Aguleri and other neighboring towns to serve as members of the vigilante group.

One of the indigenes, Mrs. Bridget Obi, who was Commissioner for Women Affairs, believes part of the problem is because of leadership by those who want to be traditional rulers.

She said that it had been a pitiable situation in Okija for the past 20 years, adding that she believed that time had come for peace as nobody was born to be king.

Mrs Obi said: "We have been without a traditional ruler for



• Decomposing bodies and skulls with some of the priests after their arrest

From Nwanosike Onu,
Awka

the past 20 years, that alone is part of the problem Okija has been having and I don't see what the area has benefited from that apart from chaos, trouble and no development."

She further disclosed that some people even used the crisis to pursue vendetta, adding that there was a total collapse of law and order in the town which she said had to be peaceful after the shrine saga.

To Rev. Bonny Odinaka, the Pastor of the Redeemed Pillar of Fire Prayer Mission in Okija, the situation is terrible.

The man from Umuhu village in Okija, said they needed more police officers to help the Army in the place, adding that security of lives and property of people is paramount.

He noted that the cause of the problem was joblessness of the youths.

However, Mohammed Katsina said at the weekend that some people were arrested over the crisis and were being interrogated.

He noted that he was in Okija on the orders of his boss, Mr. Haruna John, to make peace, adding that he invited all the warring groups at the town hall of Okija where everybody aired their views.

Katsina, added that instead of destruction by people following any provocation, they should go to court to seek re-



• Chief priest of Ogwugwu

dress. He believes with the meeting of the indigenes of the town last weekend and the de-

ployment of the joint team of Army and the police, calm has returned to the town.

Some of the indigenes disagreed over the statement, adding that the agonising thing now is the burden of feeding the Army/police personnel in the area, adding that each compound in Okija spends about N2,000 for the upkeep of the men weekly.

According to Mrs. Obi, "though, calm has returned to the area with the combined team, but is still hanging, the people are still in pains and agony of making contribution for the upkeep of the men."

"Since after the shrine palaver, the youth's source of making money has been closed, hence the frustration. They started organising themselves into vigilante groups to disorganise the one the community set up *abinitio* and in the process they killed one of the boys that came from Umuleri and this sparked off the crisis".

However, according to investigation over the weekend, it was alleged that the problem in the town had been between the family of the late traditional ruler of the town, Igwe Obi Okezie and Igwe Ben Okeke.

It was further gathered that some people were killed and many houses burnt. The police authorities refuted such claims.

Over the weekend, a source from the town said one of the priests of the shrines (Ogwugwu Idigo) died last Thursday but the death has not been made known.