

NIGER DELTA REPORT

FEATURE

Day Ugborodo men, women

THERE was palpable tension in Warri, Sapele, Benin City and even Lagos and other towns inhabited by Itsekiri indigenes in the run-up to the gathering of thousands of Ugborodo indigenes from all over the world. The venue was the famous Ikpere Hall at Ode-Ugborodo, the traditional headquarters of Ugborodo community perched on the tips of the Atlantic Ocean in Warri South West Local Government Area of Delta State.

It was tagged the 'Mother of all Gatherings' by some, while others simply said it was the last frontier in the battle to reclaim the oil-rich community from wicked leaders, whose supremacy tussle over the Ugborodo Governing Board, an arm of the influential Ugborodo Trust, had caused so much deaths and suffering.

On one side of the divide is David Tonwe, a former councillor, former chairman of Warri South West Local Government Area and one-time chair of the Governing Board. His counterpart is Chief Thomas Ereyitomi, his former deputy who won an election into the highest position in the council. Both men, rich in their own rights, have been recurring decimals in the history of the community over the years and they backed by various leaders for various diverse reasons.

The rivalry between the two groups had led to several deaths and destruction of property, which some accounts put at about a billion naira in the past years. The tempo in the bloody beat reached its crescendo on January 4, 2013, when a section in the crisis invaded the town. The incident led to several deaths and wanton destruction of property.

The fuel for the latest insurgence was the battle by the two sides to reposition for the control of the \$16billion Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in the community. The composition of a

From Shola O'Neil, Warri

21-member committee to interface with the Federal Government had seen both sides flexing their muscles.

Prior to the gathering of Saturday, February 1, a faction in the crisis had raised the alarm over alleged plan to scuttle the peace deal of the state government. A statement signed by 10 elders, led by Pa Wynne Agba, a former Secretary of the Council of Elders and Sandys Omadeli Uvwoh, among others, alleged that the Tonwe/Dr Alex Ideh faction had concluded plan single-handedly nominate members.

They insisted that the move was against the decision of the peace committee headed by the Secretary to Delta State Government, Comrade Ovouzor Macaulay, that each group nominates 10 members each. "However, information available to us indicates that the Dr. Alex Ideh/David Tonwe faction in collaboration with some elders in their faction, have concluded plans to hold a meeting in Ode-Ugborodo on Saturday, February 1, 2014, for the purpose of constituting the entire

21-member Ogidigben (Ugborodo) EPZ Interface Committee envisaged by the peace committee.

"This is contrary to the directive of the peace committee in Asaba on January 19, 2014, accepted by both factions," Pa Wynne added.

The peace deal brokered by the government was against the backdrop of the January bloodbath and fever-pitch tension as the project drew nearer. President Jonathan had waded in and asked the state governor to rein in the crisis before it spiralled out of control. On his own the governor had also made several efforts, but distrust and suspicion over his intention had kept the Tonwe

group out of it.

The Olu of Warri, Ogiame Atuwatse II, visited Governor Uduaghan after the bloodbath and chose Austin Oborogbeyi to chair the 21-committee, leaving 20 that was shared 10/10 among the factions. But even as the Olu was announcing his choice, the community leaders including Pa JOS Ayomike, had slammed the monarch. They particularly criticised his silence over the invasion and death of Ugborodo people.

It was against this fluid background that hundreds of elders, youths, women and children started streaming from the various communities into Arunton, enroute to Ode-Ugborodo venue of the meeting.

They came from all over the world - from the state, all over Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Joseph Ayomike, founder of Agura Hotel, one of the foremost hotels in Abuja, Mr Maxwell Okoro, a former Director of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Ete Harriman-Ayida, Moses Ajijala, Edward Okoturo, Patrick Metseagharun and Solomon Iyinboh.

David Tonwe, Joseph Uwawa and Michael Lodge, the youth leader, were there too, but Tonwe's counterpart, Thomas Ereyitomi, Ayirimi Emami, Isaac Botosan and other prominent members of that faction were conspicuous by their absence.

The atmosphere was tensed. Highly charged community youths stood on the beach - there is no jetty - awaiting the arrival of guests. They insisted that all the guests disembarked on the beach, as they (youths) usually do, and make the long journey through Arunton through the sandy path to the Ikpere hall located at the end of the community.

This reporter was one of those who made that long journey. On the way, he passed the Eghare-Aja Wellington Ojogor,

Any information that students have about the merger of two sets (2nd and 3rd Sets) into one is at this time a rumor, a notion frowned upon seriously in Bayelsa State Government officialdom. Nevertheless, there is a national mandate to



• Benson Omadeli and Ugborodo youths



• Pa Wilson Akperi (r) with other Ugborodo leaders

Mama Ayuwe and other prominent leaders of the community. Weighed down by age, Eghare Ojogor's steps were shorter and visibly more painful. But he made the journey.

At the town hall, already seated was the Olaja-Orori Benson 'Dube' Omadeli, dressed in impeccable white long sleeve traditional shirt over a red 'single' wrapper. On his head he tied his customary headgear - a somewhat off-colour peach/purple damask headscarf.

The spiritual head did not enter the town hall. He sat under a canopy mounted outside at a vantage position from where he could see through the sea of people to the podium where Eghare Ojogor and other leaders sat. His face was

deadpan.

When the meeting started, Omadeli sprang to life; his voice rang out, cutting through the crowd and reaching the podium and the throng of people either standing or seating outside the hall. He told them that the purpose of the meeting was to deliberate on happenings in the community over the past weeks, including his arrest and allegation of illegal bunkering and attempted murder levelled against him and the trio of Michael Lodge (aka Ukpede), Joseph Uwawa (Logbemi) and Churchill Omadeli.

In moving speech punctuated by the shout of 'heart of God move them, hand of God move them' and chants of 'end of our sufferings', the Olaja-Orori, showed his apparent ease with the Itsekiri language as he expressed the gratitude of the Ugborodo people to the Federal Government for the proposed EPZ.

He said, "We are here for the progress of the EPZ; whatever assistance we can offer, we will. We have been tagged trouble-makers, but we are not. We must comport ourselves like trained and educated people."

The meeting reached boiling point when the issue of the acquisition of land for the project came up for debate. They were vehement in the expression of displeasure over the handling of the project thus far and condemnation of the performance of the Trust.

Speakers, including Ayon Gbesin Asin, Wilson Akperi, Boyo Iyinboh, Anunu Uwawa, Michael Rowaino, Oludewa Oritsedumi, Anderson Ebieku-

Niger Delta's agenda for

rejected their leaders



• Joseph Ayomike, founder of the Warri Coral Society, Maxwell Okoro, former CBN Director



• Mama Ayuwe with Ugborodo women

tan and Moses Ajijala said the leadership of the Trust over the years had betrayed their trusts.

Akperi was particularly aggrieved that while the communities of their Ijaw counterparts were fast developing because of proper management of their resources, Ugborodo community was decaying.

"As the Ijaws are empowered that is how our Itsekiri sons and daughters are also empowered. But look at our communities; look at the hall where we are holding this meeting today!"

For his part, Iyinboh said, "Our (Ugborodo) enemies are within us. We have been too patient when we know our fund is being looted and did not chase out our oppressors. Our people must benefit from the goodness in our land."

Anunu Uwawa lamented

that some of the leaders who were in position to share the benefits reportedly told those who got the jobs slots allotted to the community that "The job is not for them to buy cars or build houses, but to feed themselves. This means they want to keep the people in perpetual slavery, where they live from hand to mouth."

As various leaders from Ijalla, Atunton, Ogidigben, Madangho and Ajudaibo spoke, they were greeted with cries of "Uya otanren ooo". And by the time the microphone returned to the Agbebijo it was clear that a no-confidence vote would succeed against Tonwe and Ereyitomi.

When Omadeli asked

what to do with the failed leaders, the crowd was unanimous in their shout of "away with them".

Consequently, the Olaja-Orori pronounced the sack of the two factional leaders and dissolved every other structure in the community. He said neither Tonwe nor Ereyitomi or any other individual, group and institution were competent to speak on behalf of the community or represent it whatever capacity.

"The traditional leadership structure of Ugborodo as encapsulated in the offices of Olaja-Orori, Eghare-Aja and the Registered Trustee has henceforth been given full mandate to handle all issues affecting the Ugborodo Community; including issues relating to the siting of the EPZ in Ugborodo.

"Furthermore, the Assembly called on governments, agencies, companies and the general public

to henceforth discountenance any correspondence, publication and meeting that are not entered into and signed by the trio of the Olaja Orori, Dube Omadeli, Eghare Wellington Ojogor and the Registered Trustee of the Community Trust, Pa Eworitse Tsebi," he added.

He warned that all communications on the letterhead of the community would only be signed by the listed trio and advised government agencies, companies and other bodies operating in the area to be mindful of the antics of "impostors who would want to use the letterhead to hoodwink them."

In his response, Tonwe, promised to abide by the resolution of the assembly. "The owners of the community say they do not want any faction again; they have dissolved all factions and taken over the leadership of the community."

Not unexpectedly, Thomas Ereyitomi, in his reaction described the outcome of the assembly as null and void. He said his group knew the plot and purpose of the meeting, stressing that was what informed the press conference of two days earlier.

He said, "The decision of that meeting cannot be binding because it was a sectional meeting. They are only trying to give it a semblance of generality by calling it whatever name they choose. It is like us holding our own meeting and saying anything. We cannot say it is a meeting of the entire Ugborodo. That is not done."

"If they say there is no faction, then they should be able to say what has led to the crisis in the community. Besides, those who attended the meeting partook in the peace meeting where the decision to nominate 10 members each was taken, they cannot attend the meeting and then go back and say the decision is not binding on them," Ereyitomi said in a telephone chat with our reporter.