

Eye-witnesses relive chilly Garden City bullion van robbery

THE pandemonium that enveloped the densely populated Diobu area of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers state recently, is one experience that will linger in the minds of the people for quite sometime.

The pandemonium was sparked by the robbery of a bullion van in broad day light on the campus of the state owned University of Science and Technology (RSUST). The hoodlums operated unchallenged in the full glare of security operatives, students, workers and visitors.

But their luck only lasted a brief moment. They desperately sought to escape with their loot, their limbs and their lives intact.

Their escape plan unexpectedly collapsed: the police had laid an ambush and none of the streets of Diobu could serve the robbers' immediate need. They ended up abandoning the loot, preferring to live to tell the story some day.

By the time the smoke cleared after one hour of confusion, one person lay dead. Six persons were injured.

Although the police spokesman, Ahmmad K. Mohammad, a DSP confirmed one death, an unconfirmed report said the owner of the Highlander SUV which the robbers escaped in was killed as they snatched the car.

The identities of the dead and the injured could not be immediately established although the institution's Public Relations Officer (PRO), Desmond Wosu, said in a telephone interview that only one of the injured is a student of the university.

"No student died in the incident. Six people were shot at, one died and five were taken to the hospital, one is our student" he said.

Eyewitnesses put the number of the robbers at six.

The hoodlums, according to them, struck as cash was being offloaded from the bullion van at the university branch of UBA.

They successfully packed the cash into two big "Ghana-must-go bags", shooting at the same time, and were almost accomplishing their mission when they got stuck.

Armed policemen at the gate challenged them to a gun duel. Apparently out-gunned and with their operation car - a Toyota Sienna - car demobilised by the police, the robbers snatched a Highlander SUV, killing the driver.

They escaped in the car through Iloabuchi and Nsukka streets.

The bandits seemed to have trailed the bullion van to its destination and launched their attack at the point the cash was being offloaded.

An eye witness who does not have his name in print expressed surprise at the sheer bravado of the bandits.



■ Rosemary NWISI, Port Harcourt ■

"These robbers were daring. They entered RSUST, went straight to the bullion van and opened fire.

"It is shocking that armed robbers could operate so successfully inside the campus and go scot-free. What we are talking about happened at about 3:pm." As the guns boomed, shop owners around the scene quickly shut down their business and took to their heels.

The police spokesman, in a statement on the incident, said: "sensing that police men were getting close to them, they (robbers), abandoned their operation and their vehicle including an unspecified amount of money in locked bags and escaped in a vehicle they snatched from a motorist.

"Items recovered from the armed robbers include a golden colour Toyota High-

lander they used for the operation, one Barreta pistol, one Scorpion rifle, 11 Ak-47 magazines, 63 assorted live ammunition, two objects suspected to be dynamite, a charm and different vehicle number plates."

The Deputy Superintendent of police added that a close examination of the vehicle indicated that the robbers sustained gunshot wounds as it was soaked (the vehicle seat), with blood.

He appealed to the public to report to the police anyone with suspected gunshot wounds.

The Acting General Manager (AGM), Port Harcourt operations of the Vintage Printing Press, publishers of the Nation newspaper, Olatunde Olosogba, was close to the scene, with his office just a stone throw away.

According to him, the concentration of

the shooting around the company's printing press sparked the fear that they (Company and its workers) were the target. Everybody lay flat on the ground. One of them almost fainted

Olasogba said: "it was like hell. It was like we were at the war front."

"We were all in the office when all of a sudden we heard three gunshots outside the office gate. Initially we thought they had come to attack us and therefore everybody was running helter skelter looking for an escape route.

"When we peeped through the fence, we saw a Jeep stocked with green bags. The driver was shooting non-stop; they paraded the street of Njamanze at least three times shooting as they went forth and back.

Initially they were shooting into the air. The driver was shooting with one hand and controlling the steering with the other. The other robbers targeted anything around their way.

"The busy street suddenly went dry, walls along the street including a vehicle parked in a compound next to ours, were riddled with bullets.

Thank God the church in that compound was not in session that day, it would have been another story.

"It was after a while that we noticed the presence of policemen. They were trailing them with the sound of their gun fire, and then the real battle.

"Gun duel ensued until for whatever reason the robbers abandoned their operation vehicle at the SilverBird Galleria. We learnt they snatched another vehicle at Isaac Boro park fly-over area with which they fled.

"Anarchy has taken over Rivers state. Terror reigns in this state every day. No day passes by without one of our workers being robbed on their way, irrespective of the time. Our drivers are not spared, it has become a norm in this state, one of our drivers currently carries a bullet in his neck.

"The police are trying, but they really need to work more. The situation has been worsened by the on-going electoral process; this has increased the spate of violence and criminality in the state, which is very dangerous for the up-coming leadership of the state."

A roadside roasted yam and plantain seller on Nsukka street, fondly called 'Mama Yam' said when she heard the sounds of gun from a moving vehicle, she simply abandoned what she was doing and ran into safety in a nearby house from where she was watching their interaction with the Police.

The recovered money has since been returned to UBA, its owner.

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