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Cultism... Rivers' major headache

Posted by: Precious Dikewoha in Niger Delta 5 days ago

Last January, a barber and a youth were shot dead by heavily armed gunmen suspected to be cultists in two separate attacks on Omoku in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State.

Rivers Police Public Relations Officer Ahmad Muhammad said the fight was between two rival cult groups and confirmed the two deaths.

"We are aware of such fight between two rival cult groups where two persons died and 17 persons were arrested," Muhammad said.

A week earlier, some suspected cultists were nabbed in their hideout at Prana Hotel, Akabuka in the same local government area. Last December, 12 people were shot to death as cult groups went on rampage in Elenwo and other areas of the state. And last month, the police paraded four young men for being involved in cultism.

The state is noted for clashes between two main cult groups, the Icelanders and the Greenlanders, who are involved in a battle of supremacy over who controls Port Harcourt, the state capital and its environs.

While members of Icelanders and the Greenlanders seem to concentrate their activities in the state capital, their affiliates, such as the Deygbam and Deywell cult groups have made residents of rural communities have sleepless nights.

Between Friday, March 6, and Saturday, March 7, no fewer than nine persons were killed on the streets of Port Harcourt. Residents of Bomu in Gokana Local Government Area were sacked from their homes as a result of clashes between rival cult groups.

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On March 24, the police paraded four suspected armed robbers and 92 cultists at the Swift Operation Squad (SOS), Port Harcourt. They were arrested at different locations in the state.

Items recovered from the 92 suspected cultists included assorted firearms and ammunition; cutlasses, charms and other lethal weapons.

The police decried the upsurge of cult activities in the state, assuring that it would sustain its "belligerent and ruthless" onslaught on the cultists and their patrons.

"Their nefarious and deadly activities, which, sometimes, were attributed to politics, have, no doubt, constituted nuisance to the general public and have the capacity to truncate the electoral process".

Diobu, a densely populated part of the state capital, Borokiri, a riverine part of the state capital, Old Port Harcourt Town, Okrika, Omoku, headquarters of Ogba, Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of the state, and Abua, headquarters of Abua/Odual Local Government Area seem to be the hot spots for cult-related activities.

The state is not new to this problem. But the political campaigns seem to have upped their ante. In May 2014, the then Commissioner of Police, Mr. Tunde Ogunsakin, announced the suspension of all youth bodies and activities in the state over alarming rate of cultism-related violence.

"After a critical review of the recent happenings in the state, especially the escalation of cult activities, it has become necessary to place a suspension on the activities of all youth bodies and groups," he said in the statement signed by the Assistant Police Public Relations Officer, Grace Iringe-Koko.

"In the same vein, any gathering of any nature by person(s), youth/pressure groups and associations must apply for police protection so that the Police can put in place adequate security mechanisms to prevent any form of breakdown of law and order.

"This is further meant to ensure that law and order is maintained in Rivers State for the interest of all. It is important to state this can effectively be done when all personal and group interests are not placed above the security of the state and its people," Mr. Ogunsakin said.

Ogunsakin directed all Area Commanders and Divisional Police Officers in the state to clamp down on any youth body or groups that hold or organize meetings without the requisite security coverage.

"Such groups or gathering by whatever name so called will be considered to be an unlawful assembly and shall be made to face the full wrath of the law as there will be no hiding place for them," said Ogunsakin, who is now Assistant Inspector-General of Police, Zone 6.

This worrisome trend last month made the wife of Governor Rotimi Amaechi, Judith, advise women to protect their children from being initiated into secret cults.

She spoke at a sensitisation rally for women in Abonnema, headquarters of Akuku-Toru Local Government Area.

Mrs Amaechi said women should redirect their children and wards from indulging in negative practices that could jeopardise their future.

"Beyond political power, let us allow the power of God to reign supreme in our lives for our children to have the right direction," she said.

Chairman, Governing Council, National Human Rights Commission, (NHRC) Prof Chidi Odinkalu, raised the alarm over the use of cult groups for political reasons in Rivers.

Odinkalu, in a statement in Abuja, listed Rivers as one of the top three places where electoral violence linked to cult groups have escalated.

He said: "The Report and Advisory itemised scores of incidents of pre-election killings and violence affecting 22 states of the federation. In the six weeks since then, the footprint of pre-election violence has spread beyond the 22 states and election-related violence in some form has been reported in nearly all the states of Nigeria.

"During that period also, the number of complaints lodged with the commission concerning election-related violence has grown by over 200 percent.

"The Report and Advisory also identified Kaduna, Lagos and Rivers states as the three most worrying trends and locations predictive of a high likelihood of significant violence during the 2015 elections."

"As a follow up and to mitigate this, teams from the Commission undertook verification, fact-checking and advocacy visits to all three states where we met with state governments, cross sections of the leading political parties, their officials, candidates and campaign organisations, law enforcement, the Independent National Electoral Commission and INEC.

" Militias and gangs: It's clear that there are gangs, cults and militias that have been cultivated and to whom the leading political parties or people claiming to act on their behalf have somewhat "outsourced" election violence. This has made election-related both transactional and casual. In some of the states, well known militia leaders have become candidates in the elections, guaranteeing that the violence is part of the election and campaign narrative.

"Small arms and light weapons (SALW): In the three main locations in particular, small arms and light weapons are present in very worrying quantities in the hands of cults, gangs, militias and unlawful hands. The calibre of ordnance in private hands in Rivers State, in particular, goes beyond anything that can be licensed for private use and, indeed, beyond what is legitimate or even for lawful law enforcement

purposes.

"Substance abuse and psychotropic substances: In nearly all cases, there was evidence to correlate (perhaps indeed even of causation) high pre-disposition to election violence with evidence of an illicit supply network for psychotropic substances to the militias involved.

"Two common expressions we heard in all the places visited were "we will not be intimidated" and "we will defend ourselves". From political leaders this is worse than disappointing. It's a confession of both desperation and leadership failure.

"There are clear discrepancies in casualty count between the parties, communities and police. This is most evident in Kaduna as well as Rivers, suggesting that categories are not clear or mutually dissonant or there is under-reporting of the incidents and consequences of violence. Communities and parties have a responsibility to keep law enforcement fully informed of incidents of violence, especially where human beings are killed or injured. Law enforcement agencies also have a responsibility to keep accurate records of the reports received."

As the elections' season go, it is expected that a sharp drop will be recorded in cult activities in the state. But for now, the people have to sleep with one eye unclosed.

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