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Owo: Fear grips Ondo town as robbers threaten revenge

Posted by: TAIWO ABIODUN in Southwest 12 hours ago

- Residents groan as banks remain closed
Natives turned their compound to vaults
Petty robbers now have free day

Nearly two months after a large 'army' of robbers invaded Owo town in Ondo State, killing no fewer than 20 residents in the process, residents are complaining about the continued closure of all the commercial banks in the town since then even as rumours of a likely second attack by the robbers rent the air, TAIWO ABIODUN reports.

ORDINARILY, residents of the Owo community in Ondo State should still be enjoying soft pillows of sympathy over the 20 souls that were gruesomely mauled down six weeks ago when over 50 armed robbers took their reign of terror to the ancient town. But no; the residents remain fear-struck, unsure of whose head will host the next bullet as the bandits who escaped during the bloody raid are threatening to revenge the killing of some of them who fell to the superior fire power of soldiers during the March 26 tragedy.

Penultimate Monday, there was pandemonium in the town when the rumour tore through the community that another set of armed robbers had come in. While some got injured while running for cover, not a few market women lost their money in the melee. In the end, all turned into a hoax.

Natives have now turned their compound to vaults, making thieves and burglars have free day since all banks in the town had remained closed since March 26. Besides, the natives take the risk of travelling several kilometres to transact banking businesses.

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The Olowo of Owo, Oba David Victor Folagbade Olateru-Olagbegi III is now pleading with the State and Federal Governments to secure his domain and the state as the robbers have made the state unsafe.

Visibly shocked, the monarch said: "I have been to the scenes of the incident with the state governor, Dr.Rahman Olusegun Mimiko. It is painful and pathetic. I commiserate with the families of the victims who were killed. I learnt that some of these robbers who escaped had been arrested elsewhere. I learnt the robbers were over 40 and they came in different vehicles. I have gone round the banks to see the evil they perpetrated. In fact, God has been kind to us in this town; it could have been worse than this if God did not intervene. I am deeply moved and shocked by the ungodly act ... May the souls of the deceased rest in peace. However, I thank our security officers, soldiers and the people who immediately went into action and exhibited their outstanding gallantry during the raid."

The Olowo, however, appealed to the people to be vigilant and prayerful, adding: "I am appealing to you all to be vigilant and report any suspicious movement or persons or anybody with suspected bullet wounds to the police. We have never experienced this since this kingdom was founded by our forefathers and this will be their first and their last in Owo. Armed robbers cannot come and spill innocent blood here and go scot-free. Owo is a sacred town."

He pleaded with the state government to compensate the families of the victims.

The Owo Local Chairman, Tunde Owabimbola, said the townsmen had brainstormed over the issue, adding: "We are forming a formidable security group that cuts across all fields like the petroleum marketers, the traditional chiefs and hoteliers in the community who are ready to fund the security outfit. We cannot make all these known on the pages of newspapers."

While the Head and Chairman, Owo Kingdom Advisory Committee, Mr Kola Akinmulero, a US-based businessman who came home said he almost ran into the robbers on his way to Owo that evening. He advised that there should be security men manning the ancient town, adding: "I believe we should have a neighbourhood police as being practised in the United States. We should have local or state police and even the Friday Police who should be working as their brothers' keepers. We want all Owo people to cooperate and make sure it works out."

Mr Ademola Adetula, a former Managing Director of Hope Newspaper, said: "The armed robbers unleashed terror on innocent and hapless citizens; the society will continue to experience organised crime and the kind of gory and senseless killings which occurred in Owo on that day. I believe that organised and violent crimes will continue to thrive until the country has the courage to identify and curb the menace of arms merchants who are presently providing the oxygen for violent crimes across the country."

Akinola Akintola Bayoriade, the NURTW Secretary (Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo), said: "People are tired of going to Akure which is about 35 kilometers to use ATM to withdraw money. Even those going to collect one thousand naira will still have to travel there. The banks should be opened with good security."

Prince Adesuyi Olateru-Olagbegi, a retired Justice, has also appealed to the state and federal government to provide security for the ancient town. "It is their duty to secure the lives and protect the property of the people," he stated.

Worse still, for the past few weeks, local robbers have been going from one house to another, robbing those who keep money at home for safety, while many are leaving the town in droves for safety since all commercial banks in the town had shut down. Those who want to transact business activities now face the rigour and the risk of travelling about 40 kilometres to neighbouring towns like Ikare, Akure and Ondo to withdraw money with their ATM or transact other businesses. Sadly too, robbers are now attacking them along the routes.

A thrift collector who does not want her name in print (for fear of being traced) was waylaid and robbed in daylight while those who converted their homes and dug holes or vaults to save their money are not left out as they burgle their homes daily.

Now the natives sleep with one eye open on hearing that the robbers who escaped had vowed to return and unleash terror on them.

How they struck

Mrs. Morenike Ogunseitan, a strong member of All Progressives Congress (APC) and a living witness, said when the armed robbers struck on that fateful Thursday, March 26, and started shooting, little did they know that they were robbers as they mistook them to be rival party members that had come to disrupt their rally.

She said: "When our leader said he would go to the police station to report that the venue given us to use had been hijacked by a rival party, we supported him not knowing it was armed robbers that struck. But when we started hearing the sound of dynamite that sounded like bomb, we were quickly alerted that the dare devil armed robbers had come, and everybody fled to different places.

"They barricaded all roads leading into the town and held everybody hostage while they positioned themselves in different places as operations went on simultaneously. Some stationed themselves at ECO Bank, First Bank, Skye Bank, WEMA Bank, while others invaded Divisions A and B Police Station where they killed six policemen and a pregnant policewoman. They seized their APC (Armored Personnel Carrier) and their guns while they started shooting sporadically at passersby and also used grenades to break into their vaults and ATM machines". High Chief Jimoh Ayodele Ojomo, who escaped by the whiskers, said: "About 30 innocent people were killed while some were fatally wounded during the operation. A final-year medical student who came home because of the election was killed; another one who was celebrating his birthday and his friend were forced out from where they were hiding in one of the shops and were made to lie flat

on the ground before they were shot in the head.

“Two mentally unbalanced persons (a male and a female) who were innocently roaming about were brutally killed by the dare-devil robbers for their refusal to keep off from the road. Two elderly men were felled by bullets. At the WEMA Bank, its manager, a security officer and an official in the marketing department were felled by a hail of bullets. Two secondary school students from same parents were shot. A 75-year -old man who, after spending 35 years in the United States of America, was mowed down despite the fact that he surrendered to them.”

Explaining how her husband was killed, Madam Folakemi Olubaka, wife of the late Chief Oladimeji Kehinde Olubaka, said: “My husband was installed the Chief Olubaka of Ijebu land last year. He was a security officer at Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo. When he heard of the invasion of Oceanic Bank by the robbers he quickly went to the police station to alert the police. But the news we heard of him was that before he got to Division A, the robbers who were in army uniform had overrun the station, killed policemen and seized their weapons. Thinking that he was reporting to the right people, immediately Olubaka reported the matter to the robbers to come and rescue the town, he was asked to leave as they pretended to be soldiers and police officers. As he made to walk out of the station, he was shot from the back, and his lifeless body left on the ground in a pool of his own blood. Olubaka was said to be preparing for the one-year anniversary of his installation.

Among those were killed are two elderly men who were running back to their farm on hearing the news of the robbers invasion.

WEMA Bank driver’s account

Olamide Afolabi, a driver with WEMA Bank said: “It was around 4.45pm on that Thursday when we started hearing the sound of gunshots .We all ran for cover. The robbers came and blasted the door and asked all to cooperate. They kept on shouting, ‘where is the money, where is the money? Give us our money. We then gave them money. One of them came and said ‘if you people are not careful, we will kill you now, we have killed one of your colleagues; so you people should cooperate.’ They brought out dynamite and blew up the ATM machine and vaults. “They asked me to drive the car and block the road and the Bank Manager, Abiodun Olasemojo, Femi Olupona, Ademola Oyedokun (Head Marketing) had been killed outside. We later heard that it was soldiers that rescued us. The operation lasted about three hours. We were all in the room hiding till some soldiers came to rescue us. We heard that soldiers were alerted and went after them. I was surprised how they killed Ademola for when he was approached by one of the robbers and asked for official car key, we complied. They asked Ademola to lie flat and asked me to drive. When I was driving out, one of the armed robbers asked me to stop again or he would fire me. They had already hijacked the police APC. They shot from the APC into the car I drove out. When the robber who was with me saw that my head had been covered with blood, he asked me to go inside the bank. It was when they had all gone and we went out that we saw those killed.

Recounting how it happened, Afolabi said: “The robbers started robbing at the same time. We heard that one was captured alive while 26 were arrested. They did not wear mask but nobody could look them in the face. Their ages ranged between 20 and 26.

“Presently, some wounded ones are still nursing their wounds in the hospital, while Yinka Bolanle (30), was shot in the belly and still receiving treatment at the Federal Medical Centre (FMC). Bolanle was shot in the belly when he went to the First Bank to collect money. Now, over 15 victims are still being hospitalised in different locations.”

Why they struck

Unsubstantiated claims revealed that the reason behind the robbery was that news filtered in that some millions of naira were brought to the banks by a political party which was to be shared among supporters on the eve of the presidential election. Another source said the robbers, having succeeded in raiding Ikare some months back, planned an attack on Owo. The attack was neatly carried out in a commando style as they were said to be over 50 robbers with different types of vehicles including Jeeps and Hilux vehicles, while they hijacked police armoured tanks and started shooting from the vehicles.

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