

Victims to govt: save us from further herdsmen's attacks

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his administration would not ban grazing but warned Fulani herdsmen and local farmers in the state to maintain peace or face the wrath of the law. Oshiomhole, who spoke at a stakeholders' meeting to find lasting solution to the lingering crisis between Fulani herdsmen and farmers in the state, warned that the situation, if not properly managed, could escalate beyond what could have been managed quietly.

He said: "Edo State government will prosecute any rapist, any kidnapper, any rustler who takes people's cows. I think, listening to all the stakeholders, whether royal fathers, farmers, Fulani herdsmen, everybody agreed that neither rape, robbery, destruction of farms, rustling of cattle is acceptable. And I think we are all committed to ensuring that we put an end to any of these practices so that all of us can continue to live together in peace, harmony and in security."

"In every conflict, you will find someone you can describe as their oppressor. Somebody might be blamed, but every conflict can be resolved if all the parties approach the solution with honest intentions and whatever agreement reached, we faithfully try to implement. That way, there will be peace. There will be no war without a quarrel, but what matters is the capacity to resolve those quarrels and to continue to live in peace."

"Like the migrant Fulani representative said, 'you cannot decree a solution, but we can work towards a solution.' And we have to use both carrot and stick approach. We offer incentives and support to those who want to do honest business and severe sanctions for anybody who breaches the rules of engagement, including imprisonment. The Edo State government will prosecute any rapist, any kidnapper, any rustler who takes people's cows. Anybody who infringes on the laws will be dealt with firmly without any sentiment. I believe that is the responsibility of government. We must reward good behaviour and be hard on bad behaviour. That way, people can choose whether to be on the wrong side of the law and suffer from the consequences of breach or enjoy freedom which democracy offers by submitting themselves to the rule of law and conducting their businesses in accordance with agreed rules of engagement."

Bitter encounters in Imo

Before the recent upsurge in killings by Fulani herdsmen in parts of the Southeast, some communities in Imo State have had bitter encounters with the herdsmen who invaded farmlands, and killed and raped their women on the farms. No fewer than 15 farmers were killed in the state between 2014 and 2016.

In Umuekune village of Irete community in Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State, for instance, no fewer than nine farmers were killed when armed Fulani herdsmen opened fire on the villagers who attempted to stop their cattle from grazing their farmlands last year.

Several people were also wounded in the attack when youths from community who came to rescue the farmers were ambushed by the rampaging herdsmen.

One of the victims of the attack, Chibuzor Okorie, was shot in the stomach before he was decapitated with machetes, while another victim identified as John had both hands severed. One of the youth leaders, Kyria Okeh, who claimed to have witnessed the incident, told The Nation that "the herdsmen invaded their farmlands with thousands of their cattle and were destroying their farm crops which angered them, and they went to force them out of their farms. They were surprised when the



One of the communities attacked by herdsmen

herdsmen started pursuing them with guns and daggers and other dangerous weapons; they shot sporadically at them with the intention of killing them."

The unarmed youths, he added, ran for dear life as they could not stand the fire power of the marauders. It took the intervention of a team of armed policemen to rescue the villagers and stop the Fulani herdsmen who had overrun the communities.

Also in Okigwe, a boundary community between Imo and Enugu states, the herdsmen attacked the farmers and wreaked havoc on the farmlands. No fewer than six women were found dead in their farms with their vital organs missing. This prompted reprisals from the youth who forced the Fulani out of the community.

Angered by the continued killing of the hapless farmers, women across the affected communities took to the streets naked to protest the invasion of their farmlands and alleged incessant rape.

Although the traditional rulers had at several times set up committees that collaborated with the state government to find a lasting solution to the menace of the Fulani herdsmen, the situation prevailed. The killings have, however, reduced drastically, partly because of the recent resolve of the youth to check the excesses of the herdsmen by monitoring their movements and ensuring that they do not encroach on the farmlands.

To check the trend, the governors of Imo and Abia States, Rochas Okorocha and Okezie Ikpeazu, and the chairmen of the Traditional Rulers' Council from both states, as well as Service Chiefs met at the Abia State Government House. Governor Okorocha described the joint security meeting as a panacea to the menace of the herdsmen and other criminalities, warning that those who had chosen to make life uncomfortable for others in the two states would not be tolerated. "The criminals committing these heinous crimes in the forests would be flushed out and the forests would be taken over by the two governments for farming and be declared government's property," he said.

"The traditional rulers would now be more challenged to comb the forests in their respective communities to aide security agents to flush out these

criminals. We have agreed to flush out these criminals who have kept on making life unbearable for the citizens of Imo and Abia.

"In particular is the case of the five Fulani people that have drawn a lot of attention. We condemn it in its entirety. It was an act of kidnapping and thank God that the culprits had been arrested and they must face the full wrath of the law. All those involved in the wicked act must pay the ultimate prize. But let the world understand that this is a case of kidnapping and not a case of ethnicity as two Igbo dead bodies were also exhumed."

Some of the community leaders in the affected communities decried the herdsmen's penchant for violence, appealing to the government to forestall further killing of innocent farmers, especially women, by the Fulani. Nze Nnamdi Agubuzo, one of the leaders, lamenting: "Every year, our crops are destroyed by the rampaging herdsmen, and any farmer who challenges them will be killed. They rape our women in the farm and kill some of them who resist them. It is a big problem and we are appealing to the government to come to our aid."

Another farmer, Mrs Agnes Awaka, shared the view.

Enugu's trouble shooting efforts

The menace of Fulani herdsmen has dogged Enugu State for a long time. Reports of armed robbery, kidnapping, rape and other crimes have been associated with the herdsmen.

But communities affected by these 'atrocities' have managed to put in place a machinery to put the herdsmen in check. Some formed vigilante groups which give the Fulani herdsmen difficult environment to operate. All the while, there had been secret confrontations between the vigilante groups and the Fulani herdsmen which whittled down the latter's criminal activities.

But since the emergence of the new democratic dispensation, there have been an upsurge in Fulani herdsmen vicious attacks on communities and their farmlands.

In Awhum, in Udi local council, they arrived a farmland where a 76-year-old man owns a large acreage of kolanut farm and ordered him to leave his farm.

He was chased out of the farm which he inherited from his father.

He was lucky to have come out alive. The members of the community on hearing his story took the case to the police. But not much came from the police. They took the option of taking the laws into their hands and mobilised their youths who not only recovered the kolanut plantation but also chased the Fulani herdsmen out of the vicinity.

Recently, a reverend father who was visiting his village from his parish was abducted by Fulani herdsmen who were operating along Enugu - Nsukka road. Uptil the time of writing this report, the man of God has not been released.

But the one that drew national attention was the arrest of 76 indigenes of Enugu State by the military for allegedly destroying a camp in Abia state belonging to the Fulani herdsmen. For long, the rural dwellers of Ugwuleshi in Awgu local council of Enugu State had been living under the fear of the Fulani herdsmen who were reportedly camping in nearby Umunneochi in Abia State. Ugwuleshi is a farming community and a boundary line between Abia and Enugu states.

The fear was informed by some light skirmishes between them and the Fulani herdsmen who reportedly strayed into their farms with their cows for grazing. The light skirmishes gradually snowballed into sporadic raids by the herdsmen who allegedly developed a penchant for abducting and raping Ugwuleshi women.

Things got out of hand when the herdsmen allegedly abducted a woman and a man from the community. Both were said to have been killed after the woman was allegedly raped by the herdsmen. This led to a counter attack by the Ugwuleshi people who were said to have crossed to Abia State, raided and destroyed their makeshift shelters.

The Fulani herdsmen claimed that two of theirs were missing after the raid. And information filtered to the Ugwuleshi community that the herdsmen were planning a reprisal attack. But unknown to them, the herdsmen had a different plan to use their purported military connection in settling scores. The Ugwuleshi men summoned a meeting to map out strategies on how to defend themselves in the imminent herdsmen reprisal attack. They did not want to be caught unawares as was the case of Benue State.

As they were deliberating, a contingent of military men (or men in army uniforms) arrived and rounded them up. Only a very few were able to escape arrest. But the baffling aspect is that both the army and police have denied involvement in the arrest of the 76 men. But surprisingly, the Abia State Police Command actually prosecuted them in an Umuahia Magistrate Court.

The latest in issue is that the Fulani leaders did not accept the verdict of the magistrate court that allowed them bail on charges of arson. They have written a strong petition that the Enugu and Abia state government, were in collusion to jeopardise their case. They are also accusing the two state governments of orchestrating the raid.

The traditional ruler of Ugwuleshi community, Igwe Godwin Nwobi, and the member representing Awgu South in the state House of Assembly, Hon. Nelson Uduji, declined making comments on the issue as, according to them, the matter is a subject of litigation and it is contempt of court to do so.

Following the petition by the Fulani herdsmen, a meeting was held between herdsmen operating in parts of Enugu State and the Enugu State Government. In the meeting, they agreed to set up a joint standing

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