

BLOODY VOYAGE -How 70-yr-old kidnapped Ikorodu Pastor met tragic end in militants' den

Posted By: SEUN AKIOYE on: July 16, 2016 In: Society No Comments

Life for Toba Osuloye and his father, Adebola, had revolved around ministering the word of God to the congregation at New Life Gospel Mission founded by the father in 1976. They craved no earthly possession nor desired quick riches. However, life took a downturn to hell when suspected militants invaded their Ikorodu residence and abducted father and son. Assistant Editor, SEUN AKIOYE narrates the tragic story of abduction and death.

JUNE 7th 2016 was a day I didn't understand at all. I didn't go out because I had some church work to do; there was a strange feeling all through that day," Toba Osuloye, pastor and businessman, began the long tale which changed his family forever.

He was sitting in a safe house in Ibadan, Oyo State capital, where for the past two weeks he had been hiding after he was released by suspected militants after he was kidnapped alongside his 70-year-old father and held for 10 days in a dingy hut built on the sea in the middle of nowhere.

Osuloye's present abode and condition is a far cry from what he was used to, his life and that of his family precluding the tragedy revolved around the church founded by his father, Rev. Dr. Zacheus Adebola Osuloye in 1976. Before then, the elder Osuloye had held various top positions at Leventis Stores before answering the call to serve God. The result of the call was the New Life Gospel Mission in Lagos.

The younger Osuloye-being the only son- followed his father into the vineyard and became one of the church administrators. Aside doing the work of God, he also runs his own business as a printer. The Osuloyes were not poor, yet they are not rich.

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In 2007, the father secured a piece of land in the waterlogged area of Maba near Oke-Oko in Ikorodu; the house he built was a modest one house and two years ago, his son completed a small apartment beside his father's and moved in with his family.

For some months, the family had been planning the 70th birthday celebration for their father, Adebola Zaccheus. The birthday was scheduled for June 25, 2016 and organising the landmark celebration fell on his son, Toba. However, that was not to be.

The journey to the nightmare for the Osuloyes began around 8:00pm. According to Toba, his father had devoted himself to fasting the whole day and had put on the generating set in his house. Toba joined him in order to complete the church assignment he was doing on his computer. His wife had just returned from work and his mother left for a night vigil about 10 minutes earlier.

"Suddenly, my wife screamed, Jesu a ma rogo!" (Jesus we are in trouble!). The cause of the trouble was the uninvited entry of about six men, clad in dark robes; a few covered their faces while others were not so cautious. Some had on army camouflage trousers; they were armed with machetes, axes and guns.

"They shouted that we should lie down, which we did. Then, they took my father out and asked for my money, my wife's jewelries. I gave them all that I had in the house, my wife had no jewelry, they asked for my ATM card which I gave, only one of the accounts had money. It was about N5,000; they said to me, it's okay just come with us," Toba narrated.

The invaders led the couple through their backyard to the stream where he pleaded that his wife be

released. A small canoe was waiting, he was bundled into it and they rowed a few meters to the sea where a larger canoe was waiting. Inside, he saw his father who was already blind-folded.

“When I saw my father, I became cold, they told us that we must cough out money as ransom. I told them that we are just pastors,” Toba said. A shout cut the conversation short. “You stop there!” A shout bellowed into the dark waters. What followed could best be described as a scene from an action packed movie.

“Suddenly, there was shooting. The militants jumped into the water and started to shoot back. I laid flat inside the canoe and pulled my father down too; the shooting lasted for about four minutes; then there was silence.”

The militants came back into the boat boasting: “Do you think your army can save you? They can’t kill us. We have wiped them out,” they shouted. But something had gone wrong during the shootout; the father was hit by a bullet. “My father said he couldn’t feel his legs again; there was blood all over. one of them checked and said the army had shot my dad in the leg.”

A ransom and death

Because of the interference of the army, the militants took a detour, a labyrinth, then it began to rain and one of them gave the father his jacket. The detour eventually led to a large camp, several houses built on the water, powerful floodlights blinding Toba and his father who was still bleeding. He said: “When they removed the blindfold, I saw a big camp on the water, it was like a village. Then they moved us to another canoe and we got to a tent, a small distance from the village. I was stripped naked as I was covered in blood. I was then pushed into a hut. When we arrived there, I heard on the radio that the time was 3: am, we were captured at 8:30pm.”

Both captives were separated. The father began to plead for his life and his son; “I am not a politician, I am only a servant of God, why are you doing this?” He reportedly yelled. His captors would have none of the “nonsense”, they cocked their guns and threatened to “delete” him and son.

They put the cost on their lives at N10 million. It was a thunderbolt to the men of God. A call was placed to one of the church administrators using Toba’s wife’s phone which had been stolen the night before. Other phones had dropped into the river.

The father bleeding was unabated; the captors called a nurse. She examined him, declared he had lost a lot of blood, then sedated him. One of the captors suggested they administer Andrews Liver Salt, but that suggestion was rejected by another. Early in the morning, the father began to talk. “Daddy called me and said I should hold on, to tell the church that they must do everything to make heaven because he was going to heaven. He prophesied that the church would not scatter after his demise. Then I heard a loud sigh and all was quiet,” Toba said.

In the morning, the militants began to make frantic phone calls. Then the body of the father was dragged out of the hut. They told the son that they were taking him to the hospital. They warned him that the ransom should be paid quickly.

In the afternoon, a new set of guards arrived and Toba’s interrogation began. They asked him about his life, if he really was a man of God; if he had a girlfriend; if he had ever committed a sin; committed an abortion. They asked for the pin to his ATM card. As he answered truthfully to each question, they beat him the more, a slap here and a kick there; the butt of the gun became busy on his head.

The report on the ATM came back. “You, a whole pastor has only N5,000 in your account. Don’t you collect offerings and tithes and you have a jeep in your house?” They yelled and beat him the more.

Toba said the jeep belonged to his father and it has been abandoned for many months due to its unserviceable nature. A boss of the militants came to the hut and said their stories had been checked out. “Your father is a good man, we have confirmed your story. We will need the N10 million because we have spent N200,000 treating your father,” he said.

They began negotiating with one of the church pastors. Two days later, the sum of N200,000 was raised. When this news was communicated to the abductors, they became enraged. “Do you think we are beggars? Are we running at a loss or making profit? Do you know how much we have spent on your dad?” They yelled and beat him unabated.

Two days later, the financial situation had not changed. Toba’s situation was becoming precarious. The militants became impatient; he had been there for four days now, much longer than anticipated. They told his family: “We will waste them, we kill people here every day; we have killed pastors before, it is nothing.”

A city on the water

Sunday June 12: “I woke up and began to cry. I knew prayers were being said for us every day but I was

losing hope. Then, God told me that my salvation was in my mouth and that I should speak. I didn't know what to tell the guards, so I asked if we could pray together, they agreed; they even thanked me," Toba said.

The camp where he was taken was like a city on the water. There, life went on as normal and people go to work and return, hawkers ply their wares on canoes. There was a seller of pepper soup, pure water; pharmacists visit frequently and one could get to buy anything there.

The 'village' was also well lit; there were powerful generators that supplied electricity 24 hours a day. One of the militants boasted that they lived better lives there than in the so-called Nigeria. The guards were changed at 1:00pm daily. There was one they call "Pastor" who announces his arrival with a cry of "In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." But he also delighted in inflicting injuries on a fellow 'pastor'.

Toba was subjected to psychological pain. "They didn't allow me to rest; if I doze, they would shake the walls of the hut and screamed. Then they will shoot into the water. One time they threw a bomb and the whole place shook; it was like an earthquake. I was lying on the ground with my face to the wall. When they come in I have to cover my face," Toba said.

Every day, at least five times a helicopter would fly over the camp, it would fly very low and Toba would hope that a rescue was at hand. The chopper would move away taking his hopes with it. Then the militants would fantasy about shooting down one of the choppers.

The militants showed total disdain for their captive. "You are an animal, you are a monkey, you are nothing to us. When we see you, we only see money. You better yield money or we will delete you," they yelled. It was a constant threat, designed to break his will.

By Monday June 13, despite the best efforts of the family, they still hadn't raised N300,000. This got the captors angry. "Pastor, you are making me angry, why are your people doing this?" One of them said and commenced shooting indiscriminately into the water. The bullets hit the water in torrents sending panic into the frightened captive.



Suddenly as if in answer to Toba's earnest prayers, one of the guards, on hearing that the captive had prayed for the guards, promised to help him. "This one no go die," he told his colleagues. "Let them know that not all of us here is bad." And for two days, the 'angel' kept his words, ensuring there was no change of guards; this action also kept Toba alive. By Monday evening, the ransom fee had climbed to N500,000 and the family was excited to report this feat.

"You must be an imbecile, what do you take us for? We are going to delete them. We don't want to hear thousands, we want to hear millions. You don't like your people, we will delete them," one yelled and disconnected the call.

A plan to escape

By Tuesday, everyone who came to the hut was surprised that Toba was still in captivity and they began to question why he had not been killed. Then they began to suggest other options. "What about Baba's friends, what about your neighbours?"

Toba was becoming too weak to cooperate, so they forced some dry bread into his mouth and he gulped it down with the river water which they called tea. When he asked about his dad, he was beaten severely. "Tomorrow will be your last day," one of them said.

Toba's angel began to plan an escape for him. He told the others he planned to release him, he asked one of the guards how much he got when Amnesty money was brought to the camp. The fellow replied "N15,000." The faceless angel said: "Let's take this money, if we share it we shall get thousands, let us release this pastor," he said.

On Wednesday, the faceless angel asked Toba to lock the door from inside. Then a boat arrived and one man shouted, "NEPA!" He brought a large sack with him and attempted to break down the door. "But my angel withstood him; he said I should not be killed. He spoke to the other one who was very adamant and in the end prevailed against his killing me that day," Toba said. He had been saved for another day.

But there were hindrances to the plan of escape; the militants disagreed about the sharing formulae of the ransom fee. A lady came and insisted that once free, the ransom won't be paid but in the end they agreed to smuggle him out.

The lady went to the camp and reported the plan. The big boss came and changed the guards, when the new guard arrived they mocked him ceaselessly. "We hear you have been praying, that you have been chopping their liver, well we are here now," they said. Now that the plan had been busted, his life was hanging in the balance; will the captors descend on him in anger, hack him to death and simply

throw his body into the river?

Toba said he knew the end was nigh. In the night, another big boss arrived. He had been to Abuja for a week and was angry to find Toba still a captive. “I went to Abuja and I still meet you here. I am angry, pastor, I am angry, you are wasting our time. People are guarding you without payment,” he said. In anger he began to shoot into the river, he hit the wall violently.

“I couldn’t sleep again, all hope was lost; they had already decided to kill me,” Toba said.

On Thursday June 16th, the new guards asked Toba to pray for them. They still hadn’t told him his father was dead. Then his faceless angel returned. As soon as the boat docked, he began to scream “Pastor I am back o, I am staying with you now.”

More good news followed that day. A call came that the ransom had increased to N1million. The militants quickly agreed to take it and arrangements began for his release. But one of the young militants came and suggested they kill him. “We would say he tried to escape, or that he was giving us trouble,” he said. The angel countered him, the plan was dismissed.

Not all of the militants are rebels without a cause. They spoke bitterly about the destruction of Niger Delta. They were very bitter against the government, according to Toba. Many of them exhibited a high level of intellect and their grasp of world affairs cannot be faulted.

Many of them are graduates who are unemployed; many had tales of woe to tell about their families. One man said his parents were roasted in a fire which began from a ruptured oil pipe; his family has never received any compensation. “So you want me to pity the father and mother of other people when the government killed my own parents?” He asked. The boys said they were on a revenge mission against Nigeria.

Friday June 17: “Pastor stand up,” a militant commanded and proceeded to tie Toba’s face from behind. It would be the day of his dramatic release after 10 days of terror, pain and uncertainty. He had been to the doorsteps of death and returned. It was unlikely they kill him now, not with the promise of a ransom. “I am giving you my fine jean,” one of them said. Another gave him a “smelly and dirty” shirt, while one sacrificed his “brand new bathroom slippers.” He was taken into a boat and after some minutes, he perceived lights. It was the camp.

“They welcomed me to the camp while still blindfolded, gave me my properties, phones and computer and N2,000 for my transportation,” Toba revealed. To receive the items, he was asked to put out his hands while they were dropped into his palms.

The chief gave him instructions on what to do after he must have regained his freedom. He was to walk a couple of meters, then he would find okada riders who will take him to Oke-Oko. He was not to ask questions or talk to anybody.

Up till then, the militants still maintained his father was alive. They told the negotiator that the two captives would be released on Friday. They told Toba that his father would follow behind him as he had been picked up from the hospital. But in the boat, he heard a militant inform another: “He was a good man and a pastor too, so we buried him.”

That was the first inkling he had to what happened to his father’s body. All through his ordeal, he had pretended not to know about his father’s demise, but nobody was kind enough to alert him that his dear father was gone and to compound the issue, the family had no body to bury. For a man who dedicated his life to others, there will be no tomb for him where his children can point: “here lies our father.”

They put him in a boat, his ‘angel’ insisted on following him to the drop point. Blindfolded and weak, they set out around 9:00pm. The captors’ rowed, eerie silence prevailed. “The way they rowed, you will know that these are professionals, there was no sound of paddling; in fact, they didn’t speak, it was like they were avoiding something.”

After about 30 minutes, the journey ended. Being too weak, they helped him on his feet and gave the final instructions: “We are going to remove your blindfold. Walk straight on, do not look back.” There was no need for a repetition, he had seen the gang in their sheer brutality. He walked on and into freedom.

But providence might have saved Toba from further calamity, for the night he was released coincided with the killing of one of the militants, which led to the massacre and deaths of several persons in many Ikorodu communities.

Toba’s mother is still trying to come to terms with the death of her husband whom she described as a “good man and a pastor too, so we buried him.”

“perfect gentleman” and an epitome of humility. “We were praying when they were there. We contacted many men of God to pray. It was a traumatic time for us,” she told The Nation.

But the family will not close this horrid chapter in their lives without a befitting funeral for their hero. “The funeral will be preceded by a service of songs on July 22nd and other events will occur on 23 and 24th of July, we want to celebrate our father and the life he lived,” Toba said.

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