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Pastures of blood

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- Oyo, Ogun farmers lament deadly encounters with herdsmen

Pains of wasted efforts, damp squib of raped women and chilling cries of men cut down in their primes are events that have left farmers in some Ogun and Oyo communities sad and forlorn. HANNAH OJO, who visited some of the affected communities ravaged by herdsmen invasion, reports.

MARIAM POPOOLA, a 65-year-old farmer in Ibeku, one of the villages in Iselu community, Yewa North Local Government Area of Ogun State, wept as she recalled the misery attacks Fulani herdsmen had foisted on inhabitants of the community. Some 500 herdsmen were using the Eggua border in the council area for grazing between December and April each year. Although they had been passing through the area for about two decades, friction between them and farmers in the community has been getting increasingly worse in the last 10 years.

According to her, it has become the habit of the herdsmen to rape women found to be alone on their farms while their cattle foul their sources of drinking water. "The herdsmen open up our barns while their cattle eat up the maize and cassava we keep in the barns. Even the planted ones are uprooted and trampled on in the process of grazing. If we ask questions, they draw their guns and shoot at us," she said.



65 year old Mariam Popoola and other distressed members of the community

Such has been the plight of settled farmers in some South West communities, with the resultant tensions between them and Fulani pastoralists. The farmers accuse the herdsmen of damaging their crops because they fail to rein in their animals when they invade the farms. In worse case scenarios, they allege, the herdsmen are often involved in violent acts like rape, robbery and murder of residents of the host communities.

The herdsmen on their part say that they have no choice but to find pastures for their animals, arguing that they are the victims of unfounded prejudice. Local farmers say some villages including

Asa, Agon-Ujodun, Ayetoro, Ugunpa, Koderia and Igbonia, are virtually deserted by their inhabitants.

Timothy Olosope, another Ibeku farmer, said his crops had been repeatedly destroyed in the last two years. He said the presence of Fulani herdsmen had left many of the remaining villagers so frightened that they keep themselves indoors in the evenings for fear of attack.

One attack too many

Violent acts of the herdsmen against the hapless inhabitants recorded by the various community leaders include the death of Yomi Alade, a teacher in the Area Community High School. He was killed in a fight with herdsmen on December 24, 2011. No arrest was made over the incident, much less a conviction.

Earlier, a female farmer, Ruth Oga, had died in a stand-off with herdsmen on her farmland at Asa village. A fellow villager was raped and killed as she tried to defend her farm from herdsmen. The bereaved father, who spoke with The Nation, expressed disappointment that no culprit had been brought to book since last year when the attack occurred.

A community leader Chief Samuel Edun, the Ashamu Apesin of Iselu, said he no longer believed the herdsmen were interested only in grazing their animals.

He said: "They don't even eat grass anymore. They are after our farm crops. If they meet a couple in the farm, they will chain the husband and rape the wife in his presence. We tried to contain them but we are at our wits' end. When God is ready, he will come and help us," he said.

Oyo: A narrative of devastation and despair



Ayete, a sleepy town in Ibarapa North Local Government Area, Oyo State, bears a resemblance with that of Iselu people in Ogun State. As the generalissimo of Asawo, Ayete town, Chief Raheem Lawal Gbadegehin is, by tradition, the one that leads his town to war. But there appears to be a twist of role. He was caught in a clash with herdsmen on a cassava farm recently.

A prominent farmer in Oyo State said the herdsmen had caused a lot of havocs in the 10 local government areas in Oke-Ogun. Chief Amos Ajibesin, the chairman of All Farmers Associations, Oyo State, recounted a murder incident earlier in the year, which nearly resulted in a riot.

He said: "On February 18, this year, the pastoralists met a woman on the farm and beheaded her. I had to run there with the Commissioner of Police to avert crisis as the villagers were already set for a riot."

There are about seven million Fulani people in Nigeria. While settled Fulani live permanently in towns and villages, many have kept itinerant lifestyle, moving with their livestock from one part of the country to another. With the nation's land resources depleted by development and desertification, there are often conflicts between these sedentary and pastoral communities.

Chief Rafiu Magbeje, a community leader in Afua, a village in Ayete town in Ibarapa North Local Government Area, Oyo State, accused the pastoralists of allowing their herds to invade their farmlands. He said the herdsmen often delegated the task of looking after their cattle to children who are unable to keep the animals on designated grazing paths.

"How can someone just place one man and some little children to look after 60 cows?" he wondered. "We have held meetings with their leaders to no avail. It has now got to the extent that our farmers can no longer get food to eat from their farms while the farmlands in Fulani settlements are booming.

"Our traders now buy cassava from Fulani people, which they usually buy from their farmers in the hamlets.

“Young farmers have been affected, as some of them who took loans from the bank have been sent into debt.”

Two-edged sword

Turaki Shehu Muhammad is the State Secretary of the Association of Fulani Chiefs of Nigeria, Ogun State chapter. He told The Nation that the current situation had made life difficult for farmers and the herdsmen alike.

“The government of the day has formed a committee in which Fulani people and the native farmers are represented. We have written a memorandum to the government of the day, telling them what to do. But knowing our political setting, it is the government that is delaying the implementation of these things. Really, it is both parties that are suffering. The Fulani community is suffering and the native community is suffering,” he said.

Yakubu Bello, the head of the Miyeti Allah association of Fulani herdsmen in Surulere, Oyo State, said that his group had met with farmers and begged them for an end to violence and reprisal attacks.

He added that the nomadic herdsmen were the ones who caused violence, insisting that there had always been a cordial relationship between the settled Fulanis and members of their host communities. He cited numerous intermarriages that have served in many instances to cement relationships.

Fulani leaders have called for grazing reserves to be set aside for their exclusive use, arguing that this would also help reduce friction with settled communities. Although there is such provision, it is far from being adequate for their needs.

All Farmers Association's Ajibesin said they would not agree to the creation of a grazing reserve in Oyo State for herdsmen. He added that the association had written a proposal to the pastoralists to source readymade feeds for their cattle as is done by poultry farmers.

Some farmers are believed to have resorted to spraying chemicals on their farmlands or poisoning the streams where the herdsmen graze their cattle. Herdsmen have also threatened to sue any farmer on whose farm their cattle die.

Dele Raji is a farmer from Saki, one of the towns in Oke-Ogun area. He doubles as the chairman of the Oyo State chapter of the Maize Association of Nigeria. He said that herdsmen have no right to complain if their livestock fall ill while grazing on other people's property.

“Is it the farm that went to meet the cow or the cow that went to meet the farm?” he asked. “That is our contention. Even if it is an open space, can an intruder just come into someone’s house without permission?”

Anger against the state

Farmers say that they have been betrayed by a police force incapable of protecting them from killer herdsmen. They complain that even when disputes are taken to the authorities, the compensation offered does not cover the cost of the farmlands destroyed. Raji said that farmers were often locked up unjustly while errant herdsmen, usually Fulani, brag about having the means to ‘take care’ of the police.

But the spokesman of the Oyo State Police Command, Adekunle Ajisebutu, said that any allegation of partiality in the matter was baseless.



He said: “We are a federal security organisation and we work according to the constitution. The constitution guarantees freedom of association and movement, and when there is crisis between one ethnic group and the other, you do not expect us to begin to support one ethnic group against the other.”

He added that the police had been trying to mediate, using alternative conflict resolution methods.

Asked about arrests, Ajisebutu responded: “I can’t give you the number of arrests we have made now. But I can tell you that we have effected some arrests as regard skirmishes and crises emanating from those places, and they have been arraigned in court. Whether they are Fulani or they are farmers, I don’t know.”

In Ogun State, the command's spokesman, Abimbola Oyeyemi, said that local forces had always taken action and called stakeholders’ meetings involving both groups. The herdsmen say they carry guns to protect their cattle.

But Oyeyemi said that insinuations that the herdsmen are better armed than the police are untrue. He added that herdsmen have been warned not to carry arms. All they need, he said, are the traditional staff used to direct cattle while grazing.

“Once we get any such information, we act swiftly to prevent violence,” he said.

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