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WE SAW HELL!

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Yusuf

DATELINE was Monday January 16, 2017. There was no sign that tragedy would mix with the nightfall when three villagers, Muraina Yussuf, Abiodun Abiala and Oluwatobi Odebiyi left Oke Odo, one of the communities in Iseluland in Yewa North Local Government Area of Ogun State on a motorbike. Muraina and Abiodun, both farmers, had just finished clearing some bushes when they decided to attend a traditional feast in the village from where they gave Oluwatobi a lift. The journey was smooth until armed herdsmen ambushed the trio and shot at them. The hail of bullets led to the death of Oluwatobi, a nursing mother, while Muraina and Abiodun survived with gunshot wounds. However, Oluwatobi's baby that was strapped to her back at the time of the attack miraculously escaped unhurt.

"It was 7:30 p.m. We were returning on a motorbike from Oke Odo, where we were hired to clear some bushes without an inkling that assailants had laid an ambush for us at Iyana Meta junction. A nursing mother called Oluwatobi Odebiyi was also travelling with us when some herdsmen suddenly emerged from the bush and sprayed us with bullets. Abiodun, who rode the motorbike, and I fell down but we managed to escape with gunshot wounds and abandoned our motorbike and Oluwatobi at the scene of the attack," said Muraina.

While the duo raced through bushes to save their lives, they soon encountered another set of armed herdsmen at a nearby hamlet and had to hid inside the bush to escape death the second time.

"I had to carry Abiodun on my back and ran for our dear lives through long and windy bush paths for several hours. Somehow, we again ran into some armed herdsmen whom we sighted at a hamlet clutching sophisticated rifles. We immediately hid inside a cluster of leaves and cheated death once again. The lady (Oluwatobi) was rescued with her baby by passers-by but she died a few hours later from the effects of the bullets pumped into her breasts and other parts of her body by the wicked herdsmen," added Muraina.

Muraina, 34, and Abiodun, 31, are now recuperating at a traditional healing home in Oja Odan. The owner of the healing home, Chief Bola Oladele, said there were bullets lodged inside their body, some of which he said had affected their bone.



“Their bones were battered by the bullets and it will take about two months of intense medication and traditional orthopaedic treatment to remove the bullets lodged in their bodies and heal them completely,” said Oladele.

A few meters away from the scene of the attack, precisely at Isuku village, another set of terror herdsman shot dead another farmer, Ayo Opeifa, on his way from his farm. To be sure he was dead, the marauding herdsman mutilated Opeifa's body before they left the scene. Sources said the rifle-clutching herdsman decided to mutilate Opeifa because they erroneously thought that he possessed some mystical power to survive gun attack. The incident was reported at Oja Odan Police Post, but no arrest was allegedly made.

It will be recalled that Yewa North Local Government, which has a predominant number of Ketu Yoruba-speaking communities had come under a siege of herdsman in recent times. Hundreds of herdsman crossed into Ketu communities, including Eggua, Iselu and several villages in the council area for grazing between December and April each year. Although they had been grazing in the area for several years, but confrontations between the herdsman and farmers in the community have taken violent dimension in the last one decade.

As soon as the news of the attack spread into other communities by the morning of the following day, parents stopped their children from going to school for fear of being attacked or killed by the herdsman whose deadly activities have become perennial in the area.

The situation, according to Olayode Williams, a community leader, has taken toll on the academic activities in elementary and secondary schools in the neighbourhoods.

“The education of our children is affected by the incessant attacks on people by these heartless herdsman, because our children can no longer go to school for fear of being killed. It was the same thing that happened on Tuesday January 17, 2017, after the herdsman opened fire on Muraina, Abiodun and the late Oluwatobi, leaving many parents to stop their children from going to school for two days.

“There are several public examinations like the state-wide common entrance, West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO), coming up this year, but the performance of pupils might be affected by the forced stay at home of students occasioned by the constant terror attacks by herdsman. Worst still, many people can no longer afford to send their children to school because their farms have been ravaged by herdsman who usually feed their cattle with crops found on the farms.”



It will be recalled that a teacher in the Area Community High School, Yomi Alade Akinola, a graduate of Geography, was killed on December 24, 2011 by herdsman while returning from school. Children were not in school for days as a result of Akinola's killing. Violent acts of the herdsman 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 herdsman on December 24, 2011. No arrest was made over the incident, much less a conviction.

Before then, a woman, Ruth Oga, was killed on her farmland at Asa village by herdsman when she protested against the grazing of cattle on her farm, while another lady was raped and killed in similar circumstance as she tried to prevent herdsman from grazing their cattle on her crops. In the cases mentioned, no arrest was made.

A community leader and Oluomo of Iseluland, Chief Michael Kudoro, with emotions recalled how his fortune slipped after his 10-acre maize farm valued at about N2.5 million was destroyed by the herdsman when their cattle fed on his crops. According to him, the herdsman have made prices of food to go up as people have resorted to buying foodstuffs, which they ordinarily grow on their farms, from markets in neighbouring towns.

“A few weeks ago, herdsman moved their cattle to my maize farm situated on about 10 acres of land for pasture and ravaged the crops totalling N2.5 million. I could not confront them because once you resist or prevent them from grazing on your farm, they would open fire and kill the farm owner. A few days ago, they also invaded a farm belonging to a farmer and cut down all the plantain there for their cattle to eat, while the owner is left to rue his woes.

“Even palm trees are not spared as the herdsman usually cut down palm leaves for their cattle to feed on. The fall out is the depletion of palm trees and the rising cost of palm oil, which is now beyond the reach of peasant villagers. Before now, a bottle of palm oil cost about N100 to N120, but at the

moment, a bottle is N800.”

“I have had to hire some people to guard my plantation so the herdsmen won’t destroy it like they did my maize farm,” added Kudoro.

Olatunji Adesola, another farmer in Eggua, said his farm had been destroyed in the last few years by herdsmen whose open activities have frightened villagers to remain indoors for fear of attack.

“Many villagers don’t go outside their homes in the evening because the herdsmen can attack anytime. They even visit the farm to loot our silos and destroy our crops. It is high time the state government came to our aid and save us from being exterminated by these heartless nomadic cattle rearers.”

Williams, who is also the chairman of the Yewa North council chapter of All Farmers’ Association of Nigeria (AFAN), said the herdsmen had flouted a peace agreement it signed with their host communities in Ketuland.

“While farmers have been truthful to the terms of peace agreement signed with the herdsmen last year, the same cannot be said of the herdsmen who are still destroying our crops and killing our people unjustly.”

“Killing of farmers by recalcitrant herdsmen is not new in Ketu area of Yewa North Local Government, one of which is Iselu kingdom,” said the Eselu of Iseluland, Oba Akintunde Akinyemi.

The monarch said further: “The deadly activities of the herdsmen in this part of Ogun State, in a way, can be likened to Boko Haram insurgency as many lives have been lost since herdsmen brought over 10,000 cattle to our communities, including Igbonla, Koderia, Asa, Agon-Ojodun, Ogunpa, Ibeku, Eggua, among others. They no longer graze only on grass but cash crops, leaving farmers with misery and hopelessness. The herdsmen open up our silos and barns on the farm for their cattle to eat up the maize, yam and cassava our farmers keep there. Most farmers, who took loans to establish farms, are now indebted after their crops were eaten up by cattle and are left with nothing but abject poverty. Many of the communities have been deserted by people for fear of being killed, with little or no response on the part of police.

“This has always resulted in confrontation and violent attacks as herdsmen armed with AK 47 rifles open fire on harmless aggrieved farmers. A few years ago during a visit to a bereaved family of a man killed by herdsmen, I was ambushed in company with some policemen as herdsmen opened fire on us, but I escaped unhurt.

“They have refused to honour an agreement they signed with us on August 25, 2016, wherein they promised not to graze their cattle on cash crops, carry arms or attack farmers, among others. Since they have refused to abide by the agreement, we might be left with no other choice than to save ourselves from their deadly activities by giving them ultimatum to leave our communities or be prepared for showdown.”

Oba Akintunde’s counterpart in Eggua, Oba Adeleye Dosunmu, told The Nation that the inhabitants have been subjected to untold hardship as a result of the hardened stance of the herdsmen, who are not willing to stop moving their livestock to consume crops in farms belonging to villagers and their lack of respect for several agreements brokered by the state government over the years.

Oba Dosunmu urged the state government to enhance the performance of an implementation committee set up to enforce the terms of peace agreement it brokered between farmers in the host communities, traditional rulers and leadership of Myetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Ogun State.

“We are predominantly farmers in Ketuland and without farming, we cannot sustain our lives, feed our families and take care of our children’s education. But the destructive activities of herdsmen have thrown our people into abject poverty and made life miserable for them. Their farms and cash crops have been destroyed by the herdsmen who graze their cattle indiscriminately on the farms and farm owners had been shot dead by the herdsmen in the last few years.

“As good Nigerians, we are not against people living with us, but the terror attacks on our people are what we can no longer bear, hence, we are crying out. At the moment, people can hardly feed, take care of their ill-health and their children’s education because their crops have been eaten up by cattle belonging to the herdsmen, while protesting farmers are shot dead.

“I was also a victim because my seven-acre farm where I planted okra, plantain, palm trees was destroyed. The farm was fenced, yet, herdsmen pulled down the fence and destroyed my farm and the cash crops there. I took the matter to court and won. The implementation committee established at the instance of the state government to enforce the peace agreement has not been effective for

reasons not known to us. Therefore, I want to appeal to the Ogun State government to re-engineer the implementation of the committee with a view to engendering a lasting solution to the perennial attacks by herdsmen.”

Speaking with The Nation on the telephone, the Chairman of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, Ogun State chapter, Alhaji Abdulmumuni Ibraheem, blamed the resurgence of violent attacks by herdsmen on disgruntled members of his group and their Yoruba allies in Yewa North council area.

“I have heard about the attacks on some farmers in Yewa North Local Government Area. I suspect that the latest attack was carried out by herdsmen who are not part of our association. The unfortunate situation is promoted by a section of our members who think that I am taking sides with Yoruba people by signing the peace agreement which forbids them from carrying arms, destroying crops, farms and attacking or killing people in the communities. But they are being misguided because the agreement equally prevents farmers from carrying out undue attacks on herdsmen.

“Our aggrieved members are working in cahoots with some Yoruba leaders, especially to rubbish the agreement which also mandated all herdsmen to register with our local chapters and Baales in their host communities, so it would be easy to monitor their activities. However, some Baales in the area have been supporting the herdsmen to disregard our peace initiative by accommodating the herdsmen after collecting money from them. Instead of honouring the peace agreement brokered by the state government, the disgruntled herdsmen have resorted to creating an amorphous committee with a sinister agenda and are now bringing herdsmen from Saki, Oyo State, and Niger State to graze on cash crops and unleash terror on farmers. Their condemnable activities are not in line with the vision of our association which seeks to promote peace, understanding and mutually beneficial relationship with our host communities.”

Confirming the incident, the spokesman of Ogun State Police Command, Mr Abimbola Oyeyemi, said: “The incident actually happened and the two survivors were actually shot in their thighs. One of the herdsmen responsible for the attack was arrested with a gun and has since been moved to the State Criminal Investigation Department (SCID), Abeokuta, for further investigation.

“The problem is not something peculiar to Ogun State alone, but it is a national problem. We have held several peace meetings with the leaders of the Fulani groups in the state and they have been cooperating with us to maintain peace. However, with the upsurge of violent attacks by herdsmen, we are going to organise another stakeholders’ meeting to address the problem.”

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