

Fear of killer herdsmen rules Taraba communities after murder of 55 residents

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Penultimate Friday, Clement, 53, went to the farm with his brother and two children. They left the farm at 5:36 pm and returned home to shower, enjoy their dinner and await what the next day would bring. Clement's wife, Din, who had brought food and water for them on the farm earlier in the day, was supposed to be cooking in the kitchen by the time they returned. Other family members were also supposed to welcome them and help to take their tools inside. That, however, was not to be.

On arriving home, the Clements saw something strange.

“What we saw was smoke billowing into the atmosphere. The kitchen had been razed. My house was burnt down. My bed and other pricey items, including foodstuff, were brought out and destroyed. It was getting dark, and we were confused. I was heading into the compound when my brother halted me, saying don’t go, so we retreated,” Clement said.

As Clement hid somewhere with the other people in his company, wondering what had gone wrong, they saw about eight Fulani men, wielding guns, cutlasses and knives and marching past without seeing Clement and others in his company.

“They were speaking Fulfude. You know Fulfude (Fulani language) is like a lingual franca here. We all speak it. Another one, very tall and lanky, passed. Then another set of over 50, and then another set of three who started coming to where we were hiding. We stopped breathing, but they continued to head in our direction. My younger son got up and started shouting and running,” said Clement.

He recalled that as his son ran, the invaders began to chase him. “I wanted to go after them, but my brother held me back,” he said.

As Clement recalled the ugly experience, tears started to roll down his cheeks. He said the bodies of his son and those of two other relatives were recovered two days later, having been killed by Fulani herdsmen. But he did not see his wife, who he said, was still missing.

David Jonathan, a cleric, also lost a relative. In an emotion-laden voice, he said: “We don’t deserve this, because we didn’t provoke anyone.”

In Taraba State, there have been blood and tears as a result of the activities of killer herdsmen. Many victims lamented their ordeal when reporters visited Lau Local Government Area in company with Bala Dan Abu, a media assistant to Taraba State Governor Darius Ishaku.

No fewer than 55 persons were reckoned to have been killed by Fulani herdsmen who deployed sophisticated guns and poisoned knives to carry out a mass killing described by many as “genocide”.

Twenty-five bodies were recovered and given mass burial on Wednesday when policemen and soldiers cordoned off the area as the burial was hurriedly done by angry youths amid fear of the attackers coming for them. Unlike in Benue, the mass burials, in different locations, were very shallow, without caskets. The people used hoes and shovels to dig the graves.

Those buried included children, women and elderly persons. The bodies were recovered from burnt houses, bush paths and farmlands. Sources said that some of the victims tried to escape from the marauders, but were hacked down by another set of herdsmen who ambushed them in large numbers.

About 200 homes and huge piles of foodstuff were destroyed. Many people were confirmed missing in the attacks which began last weekend in Donada settlement, home to Fulani, Yangdan, Bachama and some Mumuye speaking people.

It was a frightening sight when newsmen visited the affected areas: Donada, Katibu Kasua, Mako, Lavaru, Jambutu and Yusa, among other villages. All the villages were deserted and had become like ghost towns. Policemen and soldiers were on patrol.

The bereaved spoke of their harrowing experiences when reporters visited the camps of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It was heart-rending listening to them.

Taraba State Commissioner of Police, David Akinremi, on Tuesday visited the affected areas to see things for himself, although he made no arrest. The police chief said: “The attackers came from neighbouring Adamawa State, where they are already at war with the Bachama ethnic group.”

Commander of the 23 Brigade Command, Yola, Brigadier Gen. B.A. Mohammed, also visited the affected areas. He made three arrests and handed over the suspects to the Taraba State Commissioner of Police. It was not clear why they were arrested.

The Commanding Officer of the 20 Battalion in Serti, Gashaka Local Government Area, Lt. Col. A. Abdullahi, also visited the killing fields. The officers appeared to be in a hurry.

Two camps have been opened in Abari and at a primary school in Agwam Kasa, Jalingo, where those who survived the herdsmen's bullets are taking refuge.

Taraba State Governor, Darius Ishaku, condemned the killings. "Herdsmen are killing people in Lau," Governor Ishaku told The Nation on telephone. He attributed killings by Fulani herdsmen in some parts of the country, to a "drive for territorial control".

Ishaku, who blamed the elite for masterminding the violence for their political and economic interests, urged Nigerians to pray for the country.

Although, Police Spokesman David Misal said there was tranquility in the area, it was an uneasy calm, The Nation learnt. There has been mass exodus of the natives who are fleeing to Jalingo and other safer areas. The fear of killer-Fulani herdsmen is everywhere in Taraba State. Many, particularly rural farmers, have fallen to the bullets of the Fulani herdsmen in Bali, Ibi, Takum, Gashaka and Gassol local government areas of the state.