



Brothers at war

•30 killed as Cross River communities engage themselves in unending bloody conflict •'Why the war has lingered for 13 years' •Police blame the elite

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Our correspondent **NAS GILL** looks at the raging communal conflict that has defied solution for over 13 years in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River State. The bloody clashes have claimed no less than 30 lives.

There seems to be no end in sight to the bloody conflicts that have pitched the neighbouring communities of Ebom, Ebijakara, and Usomotong, all in Abi Local Government of Cross Rivers State, against one another for many years now.

The latest of the clashes took place on December 16, 2019 leaving scores of people dead.

Property estimated at millions of naira were destroyed.

The clashes have their origin in claims of ownership of farmlands.

Repeated efforts by government and the security agencies to resolve the issue have not succeeded.

Cross River State Police Commissioner, Nkereuwem Akpan, confirmed the latest clash, saying security had been reinforced in the area.



The paramount ruler of Abi Local Government Area, His Royal Majesty, Solomon Osim Edward, also confirmed the incident which, according to him, occurred as he returned from a meeting of traditional rulers in Abuja to his domain in Usumutong.

In a telephone interview, HRH Solomon Edward described the magnitude of the conflict as frightening.

He advised the state government to ensure the return of Ebijakara people to their ancestral home from where they were allegedly sacked by the people of Ebom community in 2005.

This, he said, was one of the solutions to the incessant bloodletting.

His words: "Since they were sacked from their ancestral home 13 years ago, they have been staying in neighbouring communities but majority of them are staying in Usumutong.

“The people of Ebom who have issues with them have not been comfortable with them around.

“They (Ebom) had attacked Usumutong community in 2018 and in 2019 when my house was completely razed down.

“Now, the people of Ebijakara want to go back to their ancestral home and I believe the government should do something in that direction to bring the crisis to an end.”

Asked if he has met with the state governor on the issues, the traditional ruler said: “During the pre-2019 elections campaign, the governor promised to address the situation and even build a new palace for me but nothing has been done since then.”

The royal father regretted the renewed clash and appealed to the state government to come to the aid of the communities.

Police Commissioner Akpan deplored the clashes and pleaded with the elite in the affected communities to foster peace among the people.

A source recalled how “many lives were lost and several houses razed” during the December 16 clash.

He said: “Heavy and sophisticated weapons were used by all sides in the fight.”

Going down the memory lane, another source claimed that in 2005, the people of Ebijakara were sacked from their ancestral land by their Ebom neighbours in a communal war that left over 20 people dead and all standing structures in the community levelled.

The source, who pleaded for anonymity, said: “The attack was launched by Ebijakara people over farmland but Ebom people regrouped and overpowered them.

“Thirteen years after, they are engaging themselves again. Unless the government takes the initiative of resettling these people, it will be difficult to stop these recurring conflicts in the area.”

Nelson Oda from Ebom community told our reporter on the phone that normalcy has returned to the community following the December attack .

“As I am talking to you, everywhere is peaceful. Our people are not intending any crisis,” he said.

“We are expecting our people as they normally do during this season to return home and we associate with ourselves and display our culture as we normally do at this time of the year.”

Asked about what brought the peace to Ebom community in particular as he claimed, Nelson said his people are peace-loving and so they called themselves together and have discussed how to ensure that the security situation succeeds.

“Right now as I am talking to you, there is no security person in Ebom but people are going about their businesses and there is peace all around my community.

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“Ebom people are peace-loving and they will not come and make trouble with you if you don’t come after them. We are a peaceful community in Abi local government area as a whole but people often come to torment us.”

On the allegation that the Ebom people are resisting plans by the Ebijakara people to return to their ancestral home after many years living outside, he said: “The issue has come on board and the state government directed a settlement and Ebom mapped the area for Ebijakara to return but they refused and rejected the area shown them.

“Since they don’t want that particular area that was pointed out for them, it means they don’t want to go back. They are rather conniving with Usomutong people who are now in the forefront with Ebijakara to fight Ebom people. Usomutong are the people now fighting Ebom”.

He claimed that the first salvo on December 16 was fired by Ebijakara and Usomutong.

“They came after Ebom. They entered our farms, attacked our people, killed some of them, uprooted farm crops and left,” he said.

“They forgot that there was an agreement that was signed for peace in the area. Ebom people are human beings also and had to protect themselves. They could not continue to watch the continuous loss of lives.”

Nelson commended the state government for its efforts to bring the Ebom and Ebijakara people together.



He said: “The people of Usumotong jumped in and have continued to fight us. There are some politicians who bought arms for them and they are planning to attack Ebom people.

“So, Usumotong people are now the problem and that is why peace can never ever reign in that axis. The paramount ruler of Abi local government is from Usumotong and that is part of the reasons they (Usumotong) believe that they have influence in government and are not encouraging peace.

“As I am talking to you now, they are secretly re-enforcing themselves to attack our people. So, Usumotong people are the problem because they don’t want peace. If Usumotong people want peace, there will be peace.”

Everywhere appears to be calm for now, although there is tension about the possibility of a fresh crisis.

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