

Bini, Itsekiri in bloody battle for oil-rich Edo community

•Two dead, scores injured, houses destroyed

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HRH Akenzua 2

Osagie Otabor

Oil-rich Ologbo community in Edo State is in the eyes of the storm. Commercial activities have been paralysed in the community since crisis broke out between Bini and Itsekiri youths over the foundation laying ceremony levy, known as 'Emolu' in Bini parlance.

No fewer than two people have been killed since the fracas began penultimate Wednesday. Many others were injured, while more than five houses were destroyed. The crisis lasted for two days with soldiers deployed in the troubled area as heavy shooting began in the morning of Wednesday.

Many residents remained indoors, while some Itsekiri youths were allegedly attacked on their ways to work.

Besides the oil firms operating in the community, there is the 55 Megawatts CCETC-Ossiomomo power plant project with which Governor Godwin Obaseki hopes to break the monopoly of Bénin Electricity Distribution Company in Edo State by using the power generated by the firm to power government establishments and street lights as well as a modular refinery being built in Ologbo.

The foregoing has led to a boost in the economy of the community and the consequent scramble for land to build houses and businesses.

The genesis

Checks conducted by our correspondent showed that the present crisis in Ologbo had been brewing over alleged refusal by the Itsekiri to recognise the Enogie (Duke) as the head of the community. The Itsekiri are accused of paying allegiance to their leader, Chief Johnson Atseleghe, the Iyatsere of Warri, and, by extension, to the Olu of Warri.

In 1988, Oba Erediauwa created the Ologbo dukedom and named 10 other communities that would be under it. He made his brother, Prince Eki Akenzua, the Enogie (Duke). The Enogie (Duke) is expected to oversee traditional affairs in the community on behalf of the Oba. This, perhaps, did not go down well with the Itsekiri.

The leader of the Itsekiri in the area, Chief Johnson Atseleghe, the Iyatsere of Warri, would later blame the youths loyal to the Enogie (Duke) of Ologbo as the cause of the crisis.

He said: "The latest clash was caused by the Enogie of Ologbo's boys. Somebody was laying a foundation for a building and some boys, led by Osazuwa, went there to collect 'deve' (development fee).

"The man said he had N30,000 but they refused and demanded N100,000. The man is my in-law. My son went there and offered additional N20,000. They still refused.

"Before they knew what was happening, they had shot my son and two others. One of the boys they shot is a big shot in the Eiye Confraternity, so it escalated into a cult war. A lot of people are now in the hospital. The police have intervened and we signed a peace accord. The Commissioner of Police told us to address our people; I came but the Enogie did not come.

"After the peace accord, we got reports that they had destroyed some Itsekiri houses in town. They burnt their property.

"The major problem we are having is the Enogie boys. They used the palace as refuge. We begged the Enogie to ask the boys to leave the palace.

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"The fight in Enogie's palace is a cult fight. It is not our boys. Our boys, who were going to work, were attacked. If he allows cultists into his palace, the other rival groups will come there to attack."

The councillor representing Ologbo in Ikpoba-Okha, Felix Edogiawere, said that steps were being taken to end the crisis, including a move to arrest the key players.

He said: "It was one Osazuwa that went to collect development money. He went to where they were building a house and demanded for money. That was how the fight started.

"Prince Johnson's son, Giwa, went to ask Osazuwa why he went to demand for money.

"There was no attack at the Enogie Palace. They shot one boy. He is dead now. They went to attack another man and used machete to inflict injuries on him."

Reacting to Chief Atseleghe's allegations, some youths found at the Enogie palace said they were not cultists but free-born indigenes of Ologbo community.

Agbon Omorodion, whose brother was killed, said: "My brother was having his bath at home when some Itsekiri went to shoot him. He was shot in the chest and they used axe to cut him. They came to the palace and fought the Bini youths. We had to run away.

"It was the development fees issue that caused the crisis. The boys went there and did not see the owner. They came back. Some Itsekiri boys came and demanded why the boy went there, saying the land is owned by the Itsekiri. We tried to separate them and the fight escalated.

“We have not killed anybody from Itsekiri. We are waiting for order from our Enogie.

The Enogie of Ologbo, HRH Owenubugie Akenzua, who denied harbouring cultists in his palace, said he remained the only recognised traditional ruler in Ologbo.

He said Chief Atseleghe must recognise his authority as the custodian of traditional institution in the area on behalf of the Oba of Bénin.

He said: “I don’t know of any cultist in the palace. The people that come to the palace are indigenes of Ologbo community, and the palace is a public place open to all.

“However, you are not allowed to come to the palace and misbehave. I don’t harbour cultists and I am not aware of cultists coming to the palace.

“The way forward is for Atseleghe to recognise that he is staying in Benin land, because he goes about saying that he is the head of all Itsekiris in Benin land. They stay in Benin land but they are from Delta State, so they must subject themselves to the administration of Enogie, who is representing the Oba of Benin.

The Edo State Commissioner of Police, Lawan Jimeta, said some arrests had been made and he would ensure that peace returns to the community.

“We have made some arrests; we have called the leaders of the two people and they have signed a peace agreement. You know, communal clashes are not always easy but we are on top of the situation,” he said