



# Tension in Benue as military hunts killers of 11 soldiers

•Over 70 persons killed in reprisal, community cries out  
•DHQ debunks reports of mass killing, arson  
•Ortom tasks military, communities to show restraint

COMMUNITY leaders in Konshisha Local Government area of Benue State and the military authorities were yesterday locked in a dispute following claims that dozens of locales were killed by soldiers on a revenge mission to the area.

While some residents alleged that up to 20 residents were killed, the Mbator community in Shangev-Tiev of the LGA of Benue State put the casualty figure at 70.

Governor Samuel Ortom said information at his disposal indicated that eight people died.

He urged caution and asked Konshisha community leaders to prevail on those who took away military weapons to return them without further delay.

The Mbator community said the 70 were killed during an invasion of the area by troops during alleged reprisals over the killing of 11 soldiers.

The Defence Headquarters (DHQ) denied the allegations yesterday.

It said its men had nothing to do with any reprisal.

On the contrary, it said, soldiers killed 10 armed bandits who engaged them in a fight.

It challenged those bandying casualty figures other than the one provided by the military authorities to back up such claims with evidence.

The Nigerian Army confirmed late Thursday that 10 of its soldiers and an officer were found dead after they went missing in the area.

The bodies of the troops were found at Konshisha Local Government Area of the state by a search team drawn from Operation Whirl Stroke.

The Director Army Public Relations, Brigadier General Mohammed Yerima, said the attack on the troops was unprovoked.

Reports from Shangev Tiev also said several houses were set ablaze.

One of the affected buildings is that of the traditional ruler of Shangev Tiev, Chief Unaha Koko.

A community leader in the area, Chief Moses Ugba, said up to 15 people were killed.

Trouble started on Monday when soldiers of Operation Whirl Wind deployed to intervene in a bloody land dispute between Bonta village of Mbator and Okpute-Ainu in Oju LGA were ambushed by a local militia.

Ten soldiers and an army officer were killed in the ambush while their rifles were taken away.

The land dispute is said to have defied all solutions.

A youth leader in Shangev Tiev, Comrade Peter Adasu, speaking on the phone, queried the motive of the military in the communal dispute.

Representatives of a group known as Shangev-Tiev Assembly (STA) claimed at a press conference yesterday in Makurdi that 15 neighbouring communities have been



•Some of displaced villagers

From Uja Emmanuel, Makurdi/  
Okodili Ndi, Abuja

destroyed by the military since the aerial and ground raid against the villagers began earlier in the week.

Spokesman for the group, Tyoh Jude, accused soldiers of razing and demolishing farms, schools, hospitals and houses at Bonta, Tse-Jembe, Tse-Anyom, Gbinde, Mbaakpur, Aka, Agidi, Gungul, Adoka, Guleya, Awajir, Shiliki, Achoho and Ullam in Gwer Local Government Area, and "are still planning to do same to other neighbouring towns within Konshisha LGA."

He added: "Our unarmed people are being killed intentionally in large numbers by armed personnel of the Nigerian Army. Presently, over 70 persons are reported dead and more than 100 people are missing, mostly women, children and the elderly, and hundreds of thousands displaced with its attendant humanitarian consequences."

He asked the Federal Governments to prevail on the military to stop the alleged killings with immediate effect.

He also pleaded with the Benue State Government to amicably demarcate the disputed land.

He called for the setting up of a panel of enquiry to "investigate the remote and immediate causes of the crises and the roles of the military."

Anyone found wanting should be punished in accordance with the laws of the land and compensations paid to all victims in Shangev Tiev, he said.

Ortom to accusers: Provide

evidence that 70 were killed

Speaking during a separate press conference yesterday, Governor Samuel Ortom said anyone alleging that 70 people were killed by soldiers should prove the allegation with evidence.

He said only eight people were confirmed dead.

He said information made available by the chairman of Konshisha Local Government showed that three rifles belonging to the deceased soldiers had been recovered.

"We have recovered three rifles from the community and we're expecting that at the end of the day, we will recover about seven. So we are making progress," said Ortom.

He called for restraints from all sides, including the military.

His words: "Following the crisis between communities in Konshisha and Oju Local Government Areas resulting in the current military operation in some communities, I, on behalf of the Benue State Government, call for restraints on all sides, including the military."

"I have already directed leaders of the affected areas to ensure that the weapons the bandits took away from the military personnel deployed to bring peace between the warring communities are returned without delay."

"I further urge members of those communities to expose perpetrators of the unprovoked attacks on the military as such an act is condemnable and also capable of jeopardising the efforts government has made to guarantee the return of peace to the area."

"You will recall that in an

effort to find a solution to the crisis, I set up a Boundary Committee headed by the Deputy Governor, Engineer Benson Abouma, to resolve the land dispute in collaboration with the National Boundary Commission.

"The Committee had fixed a date for the demarcation of the area in contention when renewed violence broke out between the Bonta community of Konshisha Local Government Area and Okpute community of Oju Local Government Area."

"Our administration is determined to see the end of the crisis and will support security agencies to fish out those fomenting trouble."

"I however urge the military to avoid civilian casualties and protect law abiding people while efforts are on to recover their missing weapons."

Our men had nothing to do with reprisal, says DHQ

The Defence Headquarters (DHQ) absolved troops of allegation of reprisal killing of unarmed civilians in Konshisha Local Government Area.

It said the soldiers displayed commendable restraint by adhering to the rules of engagement in the face of unprovoked attacks and therefore deserved accolades.

Acting Director Defence Information, Brigadier General Onyema Nwachukwu, said in a statement that "numerous publications in the media and other online blogs reporting massive killing and destruction of houses and other property by the military in Konshisha LGA of Benue State" were untrue.

He said: "There have been incessant cases of communal

clashes in recent times between the people of Konshisha and Oju over boundary demarcation.

"As part of efforts to resolve the crisis, the Benue State Government held series of meetings with stakeholders from both local governments with a view to arriving at amicable solution to the problem."

"Appreciable progress has been made and a final date fixed for all stakeholders to meet in the disputed areas to fully demarcate the boundary so that peace could reign."

"Trouble however started on the eve of the final meeting during Easter holiday, with reports that fresh fighting has broken out in the area."

"All along, 72 Special Forces Battalion has troops deployed on the Oju side of the boundary and troops of the Battalion were on their way to replenish their colleagues on 5 April 2021 when they were attacked by armed bandits at Bonta in Konshisha."

"The troops who were under the command of a Captain were seized at a checkpoint mounted by the so called Bonta Boys and taken into Konshisha forest where they were all brutally murdered."

"Not satisfied with killing the soldiers, the bandits proceeded to burn all the 11 soldiers and their officer beyond recognition while their weapons and ammunition were carted away. Military reinforcements were dispatched to Bonta the following morning."

"Unfortunately, the reinforcement also came under attack from close to 500 armed youths who by this time had fully occupied Bonta."

"The sheer number of youths involved in the attacks suggests that the armed bandits cannot be from Bonta alone but were joined by bandits from other parts of Konshisha LGA."

"The military repelled the attack after more than four hours of intense fighting during which military helicopter provided close air support to ground troops."

"Ten armed bandits were killed during the fight with the rifle of one of the soldiers killed in action soldiers recovered from the bandits who fell casualty during the exchange of fire."

"The Defence Headquarters wish to put it on record that apart from this initial 10 bandits, there are no other civilian casualties recorded in any part of Konshisha till date."

We therefore challenge anybody from Konshisha to present to the public the 200, 70 or 30 dead bodies of innocent persons, male, female or children killed by troops in Konshisha."

"There was never a massacre as being touted by some mischief makers."

The remnants of the armed bandits that escaped from Bonta withdrew into neighbouring villages where they kept on attacking troops as they continued with the search operation through Bonta into other parts of Konshisha."

Knowing the implications of killing troops in cold blood, most of the villagers fled their homes which were then occupied by armed bandits who kept firing at troops from the settlements as they advanced into Konshisha."

"Troops repelled the attacks and destroyed the houses and other buildings which the criminals used as hideout for the attacks."

"The use of abandoned settlements by armed bandits to attack troops is popular with insurgents. The aim is to draw military fire into the dwellings and then turn round to blame soldiers for the destruction."

"This is common guerilla tactics armed bandits designed to whip up public sentiment against security forces, and this is what played out in Konshisha."

"This accounts for some of the burnt houses being reported in the press."

"Some of the phones of the dead soldiers were also tracked to some of the settlements."

"We should therefore blame the armed bandits for the destruction since they used these settlements as hideouts for attacks."

"It will be wrong to blame soldiers who are in Konshisha on legitimate duties when some of them were murdered in cold blood."

"Some of the buildings being paraded today were actually burnt during earlier communal clashes between Konshisha and Oju all of which the sponsors of the mayhem are now blaming on the military."

"Finally, the Defence Headquarters wishes to state that soldiers deployed to Konshisha displayed commendable restraints by adhering to the rules of engagement in the face of unprovoked attacks and therefore deserve accolades."

"In addition to the return of all carted away weapons, the local leaders of Konshisha must bring the main actors responsible for the mayhem to security forces to face justice."

"They must also surrender all other weapons in their possession."

"The military will not tolerate the jungle justice attitude and dastardly acts leading to the gruesome murder of patriotic soldiers on legitimate duty to keep the peace."

"We look forward to working with the Benue State Government in its promise to support security forces in fishing out those fomenting trouble in Konshisha."

"Once again, there is no massacre in Konshisha, and the stories making the rounds are fabricated by bandits and their sponsors to smear the military after murdering troops in cold blood."