

# Soldier, suspected IPOB member killed in crossfire

From Chris Njoku, Owerri

**T**HE Army yesterday confirmed the killing of a soldier and a suspected member of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) during a shootout in Imo State.

Properties were set ablaze as troops and suspected members of IPOB's security arm, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), clashed in the Awommamma community of Oru East Local Government Area on Monday.

There was tension in the community yesterday as many residents fled their homes.

Commercial activities were adversely affected, but security agents have taken over the area to restore order.

The Imo State Government condemned the incident, describing it as regrettable and ordering a probe.

It accused aggrieved soldiers of carrying out a reprisal by burning houses in the community, but the Army blamed it on IPOB members.

The Army, in a statement by the Acting Deputy Director Army Public Relations 82 Division, Abubakar Abdullahi, said

the hoodlums were enforcing the sit-at-home directive earlier issued and cancelled by IPOB.

It accused IPOB of deceit, saying the group's members have continued to enforce the Monday sit-at-home despite announcing that it has been cancelled.

IPOB declared the sit-at-home to protest the detention of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, who is on trial over terrorism and treasonable felony charges.

Despite the cancellation, residents and commuters have been attacked in the Southeast for coming out on Mondays, with IPOB describing the perpetrators as "impostors" and vowing to hunt them down.

The Army said: "Troops conducting Exercise GOLDEN DAWN dispersed IPOB/ESN hoodlums carrying out arson while enforcing the illegitimate sit-at-home order imposed by the proscribed group at Awo-Mmamma Community, Oru East Local Government Area of Imo State on 22 November 2021.

"In the quest to compel citizens to comply with the unlawful order, IPOB/ESN criminals indulged in harassment, intimidation and physical abuse of commuters going about their lawful businesses.

"The criminals went further to carry out arson and destruction of businesses and homes at Ishieke junction (along Owerri-Onitsha Expressway) as a vendetta against the citizens for not complying with the illegal order.

"The hoodlums, who had earlier blocked the highway, set ablaze a commercial vehicle heading towards Onitsha.

"Vigilant troops responding to distress calls by motorists and shop owners swiftly moved to the scene and engaged the hoodlums in a firefight. The troops overwhelmed the hoodlums forcing them to scamper in different directions.

"The troops pursued the hoodlums to their hideout in Akatta Community in Oru East LGA, where a member of the group was neutralised in the shootout.

"While the troops engaged the hoodlums in their hideout, oth-

er members of the group who alleged that some individuals had volunteered information to the troops mustered at Ishieke junction and set ablaze houses and businesses of law-abiding citizens.

"The troops again returned to the junction to disperse the hoodlums. Unfortunately, a gallant soldier paid the supreme price in defence of the people."

The Army said since April 5 when some "unscrupulous elements" invaded the Custodial Centre in Owerri and freed over 1,800 inmates, there has been an upsurge in criminality such as kidnapping, carjacking, robbery, killing and arson in Imo.

"These criminal elements have since then wreaked havoc in the state and its environs.

"Even in the face of unwholesome propaganda by IPOB/ESN, other criminal elements and their collaborators to misinform and mislead Nigerians on the truth regarding the arson at Awo-Mmamma, the Nigerian Army will continue to remain professional.

"The Nigerian Army appeals

to the good people of Imo State to ignore the propaganda and threats by IPOB and its affiliate groups, who despite their deceitful calls cancelling the Monday sit at home order, have continued to intimidate and harass citizens who come out to do their legitimate business."

Imo government, in a statement by the Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Declan Emelumba, said the soldier did not deserve to die in that manner.

"Certainly, this soldier who was on a legitimate duty to ensure free flow of traffic and to protect lives and property on this fateful Monday did not deserve to die such a gruesome death.

"On the other hand, government deprecates reports of wanton destruction of property visited on the community by aggrieved soldiers.

"The indiscriminate burning of residential and businesses premises of innocent citizens was not an appropriate response since two wrongs will never make a right.

"Government has good rea-

sons to believe that there is more to the sad event than meets the eyes.

"Government, therefore, advises both parties to exercise utmost restraint and maintain the peace while the investigation lasts.

"Government appreciates the enormous sacrifice by security agencies with the attendant risks, to keep Imo safe for all law-abiding citizens.

"Equally, government restates its charge to security agencies in the state to always abide by the rules of engagement as spelt out by their services while carrying out their legitimate assignments.

"On the other hand, communities are advised to always cooperate with security agencies to track down and arrest criminals in their midst.

"The government extends its heartfelt condolences to the family of the dead soldier while deeply sympathising with the victims of the crisis.

"Government will take immediate measures to ameliorate their losses while at the same time ensuring that such an ugly incident does not recur."