

Survivors relive ordeal as gunmen turn festival into bloody scene

By Innocent Duru On Apr 9, 2022



Zarache, a festival annually held by the people of Miango District in Bassa Local Government Area of Plateau State to pray for peace and good harvest, among other needs, turned bloody last weekend as the people were attacked and shot by gunmen believed to be herders. No fewer than 17 people were reportedly killed in the attacks during which many others sustained various degrees of injuries. Such mindless attacks on the community, according to the natives, date back to 2001 when killer herdsmen started experimenting with shedding their blood in the middle of celebrations, INNOCENT DURU reports.

- *Three mourners killed, bereaved mother shot in another attack*
- *Soldiers told us they were not instructed to shoot – Community leader*
- *Survivors in critical conditions —Doctor*

Yakubu Danladi, a seven year old boy, went out last Saturday to join other members of the community to celebrate the annual festival of Zarache. After the initial rituals, he moved with the elderly members of the community on a hunting expedition that saw them journeying for a long distance.

Although he was fatigued, the excitement the exercise provided kept him going as he looked forward to getting home to share his experience with his peers who would not dare the trip. But his plans were shattered towards the end of the ceremony as killer herdsman swooped on them and shot indiscriminately.

Although Yakubu narrowly escaped being hit by a bullet, he was not lucky enough to escape bloody injuries. He had in his head a machete cut that left a big gash on his skull. He was not able to talk yet when The Nation called at Enos Hospital where he and many other survivors of killer herders' attacks were admitted.

His distraught mother who sat beside him on his hospital bed said: "He went hunting with the adults during the festival. We did not even know that he went with them.

"In the course of the attack, the herders cut his head with a machete. He cannot talk now. His condition makes us sad.

"I don't know how we would raise money to settle his bills. Our farm produce that could have fetched us money was destroyed by cattle. The menace of herders in this area is worrisome. They are bringing untold sorrow to our community," she added.

Zanjo Patrick, 27, was not as lucky as Yakubu as he tried to flee from the assailants. He was shot in the neck and left writhing in pains.

"On Sunday, we went for the final rites and that was where the herders attacked us," he said.

"They shot me in the back of my neck. Three of us were shot at the spot. The two others have been discharged.

"I saw that two of my people that were shot and killed instantly. I learnt they were buried on Sunday.

"We have a festival here that we celebrate annually. The festival started on Saturday, which was April 2."

Another survivor, Bari Dauda, escaped unscathed but fell badly in the course of fleeing and sustained serious injuries.

He said: "I was coming back on Sunday from the last point of our annual festival when the herders attacked me and others. I fell badly and injured my neck and leg while fleeing from the murderous herders who were shooting sporadically."

Before the April 2 attacks, checks revealed that there had been many others in which children and adults were killed.

For Madam Ladi Ize, a 75 year-old member of the community, it was a case of compounded woes. She had lost her son, and while mourning his demise in the company of other relations, some killer herdsmen stormed the premises and shot at everyone and everything in sight.

By the time the smoke from their guns cleared, three of the mourners lay dead while the septuagenarian woman was hit by a bullet.

Speaking through an interpreter, Madam Ize said: “The incident occurred on March 28. I lost one of my sons and went for the burial. But while we were there, the herders came and attacked us. They killed three female mourners that very night. I was shot on my rib but I managed to escape with my two grandchildren.”

A day before the attack on Madam Ize’s area, the gunmen had attacked another area, killing one person in the process. A survivor of the incident, Ishaya John, told our correspondent on his hospital bed that it was a dark moment in his life.

John said: “On the 29th of March, I was sleeping in the house at about 10pm. I heard a gunshot and woke up. When I peeped through the window, I saw the herders surrounding the whole house.

“Before I could think of escaping, they broke the door and entered the house. They shot me in the ribs. After shooting me, I lay down half dead and they thought that I was dead.

“I fell face down. They lifted me to see if I was still breathing, and knowing what they were up to, I pretended to have died and they dropped me on the ground. When they saw that I was not moving, they left.

“After they had left, I was still hearing gunshots so I remained on the ground. They later came back to check if I was alive or dead.

“Other members of my family had fled before the assailants came. They thought I had run away, but unknown to them, I was sleeping inside the house.

“The gunmen killed one person in the neighbourhood that night.

“These attacks started way back in 2001. They started killing us from then till now. Unfortunately, the government is saying nothing. We have surrendered everything to God. We can’t fight them.

One attack too many

On March 31, 2022, herdsmen attacked La’ake Village of Kwall District, Rigwe Chieftdom. A statement by the National Publicity Secretary of Irigwe Development Association (IDA), Davidson Malison, said two people were killed in the attack with houses razed.

“Four motorcycles were burnt, 10 water pump machines were burnt down, nine generators were also burnt while three motorcycles were carted away.

“The attack, according to eyewitnesses, started around 1:05 am and lasted more than two hours unchecked. The entire Village has been sacked.

“The land has suffered a lot and the damages are becoming unbearable. The agenda of ethnic cleansing of the Rigwe people will not triumph.

“This is the third day the area has continuously been attacked without efforts by those saddled with the responsibility of protecting lives and property of the citizens to curb it,” Malison said. On November 26, 2021, 10 people, six of whom were members of the same family, were said to have been killed by the herders.

A statement by the Public Relations Officer of Miango Youth Development Association (MYDA), Nuhu B Nga, after the incident reads: “Te’egbe, a community under Miango District was attacked in the early hours of 26th November, 2021. The attack lingered for more than 2hrs from 12am-2am.

“During the attack, 10 people, six of which were from the same family, were killed. They include Gara Ku (80), Wiye Gara (67), Tala Gara (68), Rikwe BalaYoh (65), Tabitha Danlami (8), Sibi Danlami (4), Friday Musa (35), Daniel Mandi (45), Mweri Chogo (86) and Ayo Balai (6).

“They were claimed and buried today.

“Three persons identified as Musa Kwa, Sibi Gara and Nma Weyi sustained some level of injuries and are currently receiving treatment.

“About 278 residential rooms belonging to 114 households were burnt down completely. Fifty-seven food barns, with the exception of kitchens and bathrooms, were also affected. This singular incident led to the displacement of over 690 persons in that area.

“This calculated attack was carried out by the herdsmen who intruded from the boundaries of Kaduna-Plateau. Eyewitnesses have it that the attackers came en masse to carry out this devilish act.”

The councillor representing Taagbe Ward in Bassa Local Government Area, Hon. Daro Adams Ruvo, expressed worry that the attacks have been happening for a long time without any help for the people. He said: “That April 2 incident claimed the lives of one of my brothers and a neighbour’s son, including a husband to my younger sister.

“This is becoming too serious and worrisome. At times, the murderers will call to inform you that they are coming. You will think that it is a joke, but they will come and attack the village.

“We have been calling on the government but there is no action. There are soldiers in some of the communities but the killers can come and attack in their presence. When you ask them questions, they will say they were not given the go ahead to shoot at anybody. That is what has been happening.

“Our leadership, paramount rulers and the chairman of the local government have been complaining to no avail. I am the chairman of peace and security on the legislative arm. I have been running around to settle the hospital bills of the victims.”

Survivors’ conditions critical, says doctor

One of the doctors at Enos Hospital identified simply as Dr Issa told our correspondent that the injuries sustained by the survivors were very serious, adding: “There are some who have gunshot wounds on the face, arms, and the legs. There are those who have fractures and head injuries.

“We have carried out operations on some and removed bullets that were stuck there. Their injuries are very bad, but, thank God, they are responding to treatment.

“There are those that only had bruises while escaping. The seven-year-old boy is getting better. He lost a lot of blood and we transfused him and he is getting better.”

‘How killer herders shattered our festival’

Secretary to the traditional chief, Chinge Bala David, who witnessed the attack on his people, said the attack took place at Tafigana in Miango District of Basa LGA.

He said: “It happened when our people went to observe the normal annual festival we do in this area. The festival is well known as Zarachi. It always takes place between March and April.

“This year’s celebration fell on the 2nd. On that fateful day, people went out peacefully for hunting. They moved from one location to another.

“The essence of the movement is for them to pray at their border areas and keep reminding people and the children about our ancestors.

“There is a particular house that takes the lead. When they moved to where the ancestors settled, they had to pray for rain and for good harvests. The location where they prayed is called Rosu.

“From Rosu, they moved to spend the night at Zandroachi in Tafigana. It was at this time that herders and some other gunmen attacked them. They killed about 11 members of our community. Those people died on the spot. In spite of the incident, our people were controlled and made to still spend the night there.”

He added: “In the morning time, as it is the custom, they would have to go to the final point for their prayer. The final point is called Richibo. That is the place our people first settled before migrating to where they are living now.

“After completing their prayers and heading home, the herders resurfaced and surrounded them again. This time around, security men were there witnessing the incident.

“Suddenly we heard a gunshot followed by sporadic gunshots. Our people started running for their lives.

“While our people were running, the herders had to lie in wait for them in front. The fleeing people started hearing booming sounds of gunshots in the direction they were heading to and became confused over which direction they should go. It was when the security operatives moved in that the situation was brought under control.

“Before then, two people had been shot. One was cut with machete and his body packed as if it was meat that they cut. Most of our people had to run for their dear lives and return home.

“We were not able to find all the corpses earlier. It was on Wednesday that four more bodies were found. We have recovered and buried about 17 dead bodies. That was what happened during the festival.

“To tell you the truth, this festival is well known and it is as old as this tribe. We don’t attack anybody during the festival. We go hunting, killing animals and praying for peace and rain, and good harvest. We pray for peace for our land.

“We celebrate this festival not to haunt anybody, but we discovered that many people were planning evil towards us.”

According to Chinge,, killings in the area involved children and adults.

“An attack took place last week from Monday. The herders attacked seven communities. They attacked a village called Ariri aside from the one that took place at Laake as well as Gurudu and many others.

“There were many attacks that took place before the one that occurred during the festival. There are so many communities now that have been deserted. Many houses have been vandalised.

“People are afraid and fleeing from their communities. If you go to some communities now, you will see nobody.”

Youths stage protest

The Coalition of Ethnic Youth Nationalities from the Northern Senatorial zone, the Christian Association of Nigeria, Plateau State chapter, youth, and women wings, during the week gathered at the new Government House to protest the recent killings in Bassa communities of the state.

The Nation reports that several communities had, in the past one month, come under heavy attacks by gunmen suspected to be herdsmen in Bassa Local Government Area of the state, which had claimed about 20 lives, and resulted in the massive destruction of farmlands and burning of homes.

The protest was led by the National President of the Irigwe Youth Movement, Ezekiel Peter Bini. The residents called on the government to show commitment to securing the lives and properties of their people.

He said the continuous killings have forced the Irigwe people and other groups on the Plateau to come out in protest to let the government and the world know what is going on and the need to put an end to the situation.

Addressing the protesters, the Secretary to the State Government (SSG), Prof. Danladi Atu, said the state government was working on resolving the killings in Irigwe land in order to bring lasting peace to the communities.

He said Governor Simon Lalong commiserated with the families of those affected, adding that he had ordered the security outfits in the state to dominate these areas while a thorough investigation was being carried out to ascertain those behind the attacks and bring them to justice.

“Governor Lalong has further directed the State Emergency Management Agency to step in to ascertain the extent of damage and casualties as well as provide relief materials immediately to cushion the effects of the condemnable act of man’s inhumanity to man,” he added.

Paramount Ruler sues for peace

The paramount ruler of Rigwe Nation, Brra Nggwe Rigwe, and acting President Bassa Traditional Council, HRH Rev Ronku Aka (rtd), condoled and praised the people of Ariri village for their bravery and resilience.

The paramount ruler spoke the words of condolence and praise on Thursday at Ariri village during the burial of Mr Ichemi Ritivo who was shot by militia when the village was attacked on April 4, 2022. Ichemi sustained gunshot injuries and was taken to the hospital, but he gave up the ghost in the course of treatment.

He reiterated the need for the nation to keep kneeling to God for an end to the evil work of the enemies on the land, and maintained that the land blessedly given by God to Rigwe will live till thy kingdom come.

The monarch, according to a statement by the National Publicity Secretary of Irigwe Development Association (IDA), Davidson Malison, said: “This is the third time I’m coming to Ariri on issues of militia attacks. The last one was during the mass burial years ago, and I pray we will not witness this again.”

He further charged the Rigwe People never to give up as the challenges facing the nation will one day become history. He added that the Rigwe people can never be wiped out from the surface of the earth because God created them for a purpose.

He, however, insisted that security surveillance and consciousness must be intensified and called on government to do all within her reach to ensure the protection of lives and property of the Rigwe People.

He concluded by encouraging the immediate family of the deceased and the entire nation to be comforted and take solace in the fact that he and other faithful departed are resting in the bosom of the Lord.

Responding on behalf of the family, Mr Yusuf Musa thanked and appreciated the paramount ruler for the noble gesture and said it will forever remain fresh in their minds.

Other people who spoke at the burial includes the Secretary of Bassa LG, Mrs Tabawa Jesse Aruku; Leader, Bassa Legislative Arm, Hon Williams Wuje, Hon Lumumba Dah Adeh

The paramount ruler was accompanied to the burial by the District Head of Miango, HH Daniel Chega, Village Head of Nedzie, Rev John Wambe Pawa (rtd), other village heads and National Publicity Secretary of Irigwe Development Association (IDA).