

How we ran into terrorists' ambush, by survivors of Katsina killings

- Fault police on death toll in bloody clash
- Community leader says 102 killed,
- 72 corpses recovered from bushes

KATSINA, the home state of President Muhammadu Buhari, drew global attention last weekend with the killing of scores of its inhabitants during a clash between outlawed vigilante group popularly called Yansakai and some terrorists in Bakori and Kankara local government areas of the state.

While the figures released by the police put the death toll from the bloody incident at 41, residents of the affected communities insist that the casualty figure was much more than the police claimed.

A community leader in Bakori said there were no fewer than 102 lives lost in the incident, adding that 72

■ Augustine OKEZIE, Katsina ■

bodies had been recovered from the bush as the dust raised by the attack settled.

The worst hit communities, according to findings made by *The Nation* were those under Guga, Kakumi, Kandarawa and Jargaba wards in Bakori Local Government Area. Residents were still wearing mournful looks when our correspondent visited the area during the week.

The genesis
The clash was said to have occurred when some Yansakai members attempted to recover some cows rustled by terrorists from herdsmen in Bakori Local Government Area. Unknown to them, the terrorists had

set up an ambush in anticipation of reaction from Yansakai members.

Some residents of Bakori and Kankara, two local government areas regarded as frontline LGAs because they share boundaries with Kaduna and Zamfara states and are frequently attacked by bandits, told our correspondent during a visit to the affected communities that that repeated attack by the terrorists had forced many of them to relocate from their ancestral communities.

Trouble was said to have begun at about 10 pm on Wednesday, February 1 when some terrorists invaded the compound of one Alhaji Muntari at Unguwar Audu Gare, Kandarawa, Bakori Local Government Area, shooting sporadically and rustling 50 cows and 30 sheep.

At about 10 pm the following day, Yansakai groups from 11 villages in the local government area were said to have gathered and went after the bandits/terrorists with a view to recovering the rustled animals.

They traced the footpath taken by the hoodlums to a location in Yargoje Forest where the terrorists, unfortunately, launched a coordinated attack on them.

Explaining the genesis of the confrontation, a member of the vigilance group, 35-year-old Adamou Hassan, who sustained gunshot injuries in his right shoulder while fighting the terrorists at Goje village, said: "The terrorists came on Wednesday night and rustled some cows in Bakori. We in our group traced them that very night and we exchanged gunshots."

"On Thursday morning, our other members from other villages joined us, unknown to us that the terrorists were lying down at the various points we were passing through."

"They encircled us and began to shoot with AK-47 rifles. After I was injured on the upper part of my right hand and there was too much blood gushing from other minor wounds, they left me for dead. That was how I escaped being killed."

Appealing to the state and federal governments to reinforce security in the frontline local government areas of the state, Hassan said the bandits who attacked them were not based in Katsina State.

He said: "The bandits don't stay here. They come from Zamfara or Kaduna state, operate and return to their base."

"They have various camps inside the forests that lie between Katsina and Zamfara and between Katsina and Kaduna."

Kabiru Ashiru, a resident of Guga Village, told *The Nation* that no fewer than 63 victims of the attack were buried penultimate Friday while another vehicle came in the following day, loaded with more than 30 corpses.

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"And we are still expecting more bodies," he said.

Ashiru's claims were reinforced by those of Mahadi Guga, the leader of Guga community who confirmed the burial of 72 bodies retrieved from the bush and insisted that no fewer than 102 lives were lost contrary to Police report that 41 inhabitants were killed.

He said: "There are about 102 people affected in our community, but the actual figure that people will tell you is 72, which were the people we buried with our hands. There are others who are still missing."

"We have lived in great fear and tension since the incident happened. We are more vulnerable now than ever. The government came and sympathised with us as usual and promised to investigate the matter."

The community leader urged government to rise to its responsibility of protecting lives and property, especially of those living at the rural area. If need be, he said, government should dialogue with the bandits and the communities for lasting peace in the area.

His sentiments were shared by 40-year-old Salisu Lawan, a resident of Matazu community who also appealed for bigger presence of security agents in the local government area.

He revealed that many people in the area had relocated to Katsina and Zaria because of terrorists' activities.

He said: "I live in Matazu and I am a civil

servant.

"I know that the government is trying its best in terms of security. But the terrorists know that we don't have a high number of security operatives here in Matazu. That is why they have the boldness to attack us."

"They also get a lot of information from informants. I will suggest that the government employs more security operatives and deploy them to the council headquarters for our safety."

"Because of terrorist activities, many prominent Matazu residents have relocated to Katsina or Zaria."

Sad tales from bereaved families

Mustapha Abubakar who said he witnessed one of the most horrific incidents of his life, recalled in a chat with our correspondent how his brother went to retrieve some of his animals rustled by bandits only to be ambushed by the gunmen and killed.

He said: "Those who escaped the first attack had called for more people so that we would be able to recover the bodies of our dead for burial."

"I was one of those who went the second time together with my blood brother. Unfortunately, from nowhere we saw ourselves surrounded by the gunmen who pounced on us and started using all sorts of weapons, including guns and cutlasses, against us."

"We had to try to defend ourselves because we were not there empty handed. But because of their numbers and the superior power of their weapons, they overpowered us."

"We were trapped with my brother, Abdulmalik, at a place, and he told me that if I

got a chance I should run away because he would not want a situation whereby two of us from the same family would be killed. Before I knew it, his dead body was lying before me."

"It was a terrifying and unforgettable moment for me. I could not count the number of dead bodies I have seen because it was so scary."

"All we need now is that the government, especially the security agents, should come to our rescue."

Government investigates incident

Governor Aminu Bello Masari had earlier approved the setting up of a high-powered Judicial Commission of Enquiry to investigate the remote and immediate causes of the incident, saying it was aimed at curtailing further occurrence.

A statement by the Secretary to the State Government, Murtari Lawal, had also stated that as a result of the unfortunate and tragic incident that occurred in some areas of Bakori and Kankara local government areas of the state where some lives were lost, the state government sent a high powered delegation to the area under the leadership of the Secretary to the State Government and other prominent government officials to condole with the families of the deceased, sympathize with the affected communities and come up with intervention proposal for the bereaved families.

He said: "The State Security Council also met and deliberated on the matter and accordingly, His Excellency has approved the setting up of a high-powered Judicial Commission of Enquiry to thoroughly investigate the remote and

immediate causes and the devastating effects of the unfortunate incident."

"The state government is calling on all peace loving and law-abiding individuals to remain calm and go about their normal lawful businesses as the government is in control of the situation."

Recall also that the state government delegation led by the Secretary to the State Government, Alhaji Muntali Lawal, had visited the affected communities and condole with the families of the victims and their community leaders over the ugly incident.

The delegation also toured some affected villages and assured the families of the state government's commitment to conduct a thorough investigation on the matter. There was also the setting up of a committee with two representatives from each of the affected communities to supervise the sharing of relief materials to the families of the victims.

Police spokesman in the state, Gambo Isah, a Superintendent of Police (SP), assured that security operatives in the state were on top of the situation, adding that the police and other sister security agencies always reviewed strategies to ensure the protection of lives and property.

The police spokesperson said: "Residents of the state should rest assured of our efforts to ensure the safety of their lives and that of their property."

"Joint security operations are always on ground to tackle situations and we have not been relenting."