

Four die, 14 arrested in Edo, Delta, Kwara, Akwa-Ibom

• Banks, ATMs vandalised • Protests in Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, FCT

PROTESTS over naira scarcity and ban on old notes escalated yesterday in some states with four persons killed in Edo.

Nine of the protesters were arrested in Delta for setting two banks and two vehicles ablaze. Five were also held in Kwara by the Police.

The other states where residents also took to the streets and disrupted movements are Oyo, Ondo, Ogun and Akwa Ibom. The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was also not free as angry depositors took over CBN's gate, preventing workers and visitors from entering the premises.

All Progressives Congress (APC) standard bearer, Asiwaju Tinubu, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Vice Presidential candidate, Ifeanyi Okowa and Oyo State Governor Seyi Makinde called on the people to be calm as efforts are on to make cash available to them.

In Benin where the protest was more intense, soldiers drafted to complement police efforts in protecting the state's CBN branch fired bullets and tear gas canisters to dispel the protesters.

The Nation gathered that the four victims of the Edo protest were hit by bullets fired by the security agents.

Some of the protesters said the bodies of three of the victims were hurriedly evacuated by the operatives.

One of them added that they prevented the security agents from also taking away the fourth by pelting their vehicles, including an Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC), with stones.

The protesters made bonfires on the major roads, thereby creating gridlock on alternative routes in the city.

In the ensuing confusion banks, schools, offices, markets, petrol stations and malls hurriedly closed for the day.

The government blamed the protests in the state on the former APC National Chairman, Adams Oshiomhole.

It claimed in a statement by the Commissioner for Communication and Orientation, Chris Nehikhare, that the protests were targeted at the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)-controlled states.

The government, therefore, called on security agencies to cause Oshiomhole to account for his movements in Benin in the last few days.

"Today (yesterday), we had the unfortunate incident of the protest in Edo State, particularly in Benin, as a result of the new naira redesigning policy. We have gone round the town and we have discovered that there is more than meets the eye. We are calling on all security agencies to call on Comrade Oshiomhole for questioning, arrest him and make him account for his movements in the last couple of days in Benin," the commissioner said.

No casualty was recorded in Ibadan but some protesters caused serious panic among workers when they stormed the Oyo State secretariat in Agodi carrying 'ebo' (sacrificial objects) in a calabash.

The protest led by transporters and fruit sellers came less than two weeks after a similar one in the city.

The worst hit areas were Eleyele, Ojoo, Challenge Beere and Oje where banks were shut and movements halted by the protesters who also made bonfires on the highways.

At Bodija Market, a protester told The Nation that he was angry that banks which are not "releasing money to customers had also started rejecting old notes."

"We can't continue like this now. This situation has become so bad. The government does not care about what we are going through. That's why we have to let them know that we are suffering," he added.

A transporter also said they embarked on the protest over the unavailability of cash and the rejection of old notes by banks and fuel stations.

Addressing residents of the state in Igbajaye, Itesiwaju Local Government, Makinde called on residents of the state to demonstrate restraints because violence would not solve the problem at hand.

The governor said apart from palliative measures already being put in place by his government, practical engagements were ongoing to resolve the crisis.

His words: "As I said earlier, peaceful protest is the right of everyone but once it becomes violent and violates the peace of other people, it has become something else."

"We have found ourselves in a very unfortunate situation but violence will not solve the problem. So, I want to appeal to our people because we don't want to lose a single soul to this crisis. Palliatives are going in Oyo State and there are a few things we have promised to do on this."

"We all have the opportunity to speak through our votes in 10 days and it is someone who is alive that will enjoy what the new government will offer the people."

"I urge the protesters to go back to their various homes. Once the protest turns into violence, the security personnel also have the right to protect the lives of other people."

Also, security chiefs in the state warned that they would be firm against hoodlums who might try to hijack peaceful protests by the residents.

Police Relations Officer of the state Police Command, Adewale Osifeso, said that "normalcy has since returned to the affected areas."

The police confirmed the arrest of nine persons allegedly linked to the protest and burning of properties of two banks in Udu, Delta State.

The State Police Command Public Relations Officer, Bright Edeke, in a statement, said "some



•GOODNIGHT: Union Bank, Ladipo, Matori, Lagos..yesterday

PHOTO: ISAAC AYODELE

unguided youths/miscreants in the name of protest set two banks and two vehicles ablaze. We have arrested nine suspects so far."

Edeke said that armed policemen had been drafted to the scenes.

The Udu protest started at Orhwhorun Junction and spread to the Express Junction in the town.

The protesters, mostly youths, destroyed Automated Teller Machines (ATM) of two banks and made bonfires across the major roads before security operatives arrived.

Okowa, who is also Delta State governor, appealed to residents of the state to remain calm.

"We appeal to our brothers and sisters across the state to keep calm in spite of the current travails they are going through as a result of the scarcity of naira notes in the country," Okowa said in a statement by the Commissioner for Information, Charles Anigagwu.

He added that people should sheath their "swords while we continue to engage the CBN to ensure more funds are released to the banks."

What was initially a peaceful crowd of depositors turned to an angry mob when they could not access the link to register to deposit their old Naira notes.

At the FCT, angry depositors, who said they were at the CBN branch as early as 6 am to swap their old naira notes, lost their patience at about 11 am and took over the entrance of the bank.

The Nation learnt that before then, an official of the apex bank pasted a link for depositors to access and generate a reference number to enable them to swap their old notes.

But their failure to access the link threw them into anger. One of them said: "We have been waiting here since morning with our monies but could not access the portal. That's why we blocked the gate preventing



•A customer displaying her old naira notes (for swap) during a protest in Akure, Ondo State...yesterday

people from either coming out or going in. We will remain here until they allow us to deposit our monies."

In Ondo, banks in Akure hurriedly closed down to avoid being attacked by angry customers who barricaded the roads leading to their entrances after waiting for hours without being attended.

The police in Kwara said the five suspects arrested in connection with the protest at the Metropolitan Area of Ilorin would be charged in court."

It advised "parents and guardians to warn their children and wards to avoid being used as cannon-fodder by disgruntled political activists as anyone arrested in the process of committing any crime, either as a result of the fuel or Naira challenges, would be made to face the consequences of such actions"

The spokesperson for the command, Ajayi Okasanmi, who state this, added that the situation had been brought under control.

started monitoring of circulation of the new notes in Abuja.

The team yesterday visited fuel stations, supermarkets and Point of Sale (PoS) operators in the FCT.

Managing Director of Nirsal Microfinance Bank, Abubakar Kure, who led the team, said: "We want to actually establish this fact if there's the possibility of cash transaction between the Point of Sales and the Oil services stations as claimed and what happened to the cash they have collected."

"But what we have seen here, there's much improvement from what we observed the previous day, that there are many transactions via POS and transfer."

Ortom seeks review of policy

For the umpteenth time, the Benue State Governor, Samuel Ortom has asked the Federal Government to urgently review the cashless policy to assuage the untold hardship Nigerians are passing through. He also advised President Muhammadu Buhari to revisit the naira redesigning policy before it taints his integrity for the rest of his political career.

Governor Ortom barked his mind yesterday at the stakeholders' meeting on the 2023 general election organised by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Benue State. The Governor insisted that the policy, if not reversed, had thrown Nigerians in pains and would ruin the administration of President Buhari, pointing that other countries have changed currency but there was a transition period.

"This is the worst policy that the President has brought at a time that he is about to leave office. Nigerians are suffering and some are dying. I have said it before and let me repeat it again. The people who are advising the President do not mean well for him. He will remain a pain in the neck of Nigerians if he doesn't reverse this policy. This is not right. Our people are suffering, now you

News

NAIRA CRISIS



• Union Bank in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State...yesterday



• Customers at the gate of Central Bank building in Benin...yesterday



• Customers at the gate of a bank in Calabar, Cross River State...yesterday



• A scene of protest in Ibadan, Oyo State...yesterday

• The scene at the Old Central Bank in Abuja...yesterday.

PHOTO: ABAYOMI FAYESE

have money in the bank, you cannot spend it; go to the banks and see the queues.

"This policy will eliminate his name from being an honourable man of integrity. This policy will ruin him, because the man out there that I represent, the woman, the children are crying; they are feeling the pains," he stated.

Banks in Ogun shut, cabs off the roads

Commercial banks in Abeokuta, the Ogun State capital, remained shut yesterday while Automated Teller Machines also did not dispense cash. Investigation by *The Nation* showed that commercial banks on Lalubu Street, Okelewo in the business district of Abeokuta did not open for business yesterday save Zenith bank, which opened and rendered for skel-etel service to few customers but closed by 12 noon.

Meanwhile, many taxi operators in the state have withdrawn their cars from the roads following the expiration of the deadline for collection of old N200, N500 and N1000 while the scanty ones working, refused the old notes from passengers as means of payment for transport fares. This has left commuters stranded in some routes within the state capital.

A taxi driver, who identified himself as Babayemi, told *The Nation* that many of his colleagues have not been able to deposit their old notes to the banks, saying the conditions for depositing the money with the Central Bank of Nigeria are complex and cum-

bersome given their literacy level. Narrating his personal experience, Babayemi claimed he took N7,800 he made from transport business in the last few days to the CBN branch in Abeokuta on Tuesday, but lamented that he was asked to visit the apex bank's portal to fill some information and generate a file.

The taxi car operator said he walked away and returned home with the old notes since he was not literate enough to undergo such process. "If I could not change the old notes and I can't spend it, why should I go out to work today and collect same old notes from passengers? That is why you see few taxi cars on the roads. I don't accept old notes any more from passengers. I also accept bank transfer," he said.

Customers stranded in Taraba

There were complaints of the non-availability of the new bank notes by some commercial banks in Jalingo, the capital of Taraba State. According to a staff of UBA Jalingo branch, although they are adhering to the "no extension to deadline" issued by the CBN, they are having issues of meeting the needs of customers.

According to him, by Friday February 17, it would be two weeks since the new naira notes were made available to the bank. He stated that they give a maximum of N20,000 notes to customers who are willing to collect 50 or 100 naira denominations. Outside the bank at the ATM point, stranded customers lamented about the situation they were in. According to Mohammed Zakari, "I came since 6

am but was unable to withdraw cash. For the past seven days, there has not been cash. I have been coming for the past ten days and have not been able to get any money. I am into buying and selling business but right now I don't even have the capital to continue," he said.

For Mercy Silas, "I came here since 4 am and since last week I have been coming. We don't know if they would load money or not." At the Zenith Bank Jalingo branch, an official told *The Nation* that they have not received any directive from the CBN about the "no extension to the deadline."

However, customers were seen queuing at the counter to either deposit old notes or withdraw new notes. The withdrawal limit this reporter learnt at Zenith Bank was N5000 while at the ATM machines, it is N20,000 for Zenith Bank customers and N2000 for non-customers. But unlike at the UBA Jalingo branch, there was hope at Zenith Bank as customers were queuing eagerly awaiting cash which was about to be loaded into the machines under the supervision of EFCC officials.

Jos residents express mixed feelings over CBN stand

Residents of Jos the Plateau capital received the statement of the Central Bank Governor with mixed feelings. A commercial tricycle rider, Jerry Akans, said, "I have been told what CBN said; we have been waiting for him to speak and give us direction. Now that he has spoken, we have stop collecting the old naira."

A POS operator in Dadin-Kowa Jos, Reuben Kawu, said, "There was confusion since the Supreme Court intervention, but with the last comment on the CBN Governor, we now know what to do. I have stopped receiving the old naira note for deposit. My only problem is that my customers are coming for withdrawal and I don't have the new notes to give them. I'm just out of business. I therefore appeal to CBN to make cash available for me to continue my business."

Petty traders in Jos Terminus market are not pleased over the scarcity of the new notes. One of them who spoke to *The Nation*, Serah Azi, said, "CBN has stopped us from collecting old notes, but our customers coming to buy our wares do not have the new naira to buy things. Now CBN has taken us out of business," Azi said.

S/Court order: CBN's disobedience damaging Nigeria's int'l credibility

Nigeria is losing international credibility by the Central Bank's failure to comply with the Supreme Court's order suspending the naira swap deadline, Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN), Harris Ogbole, has said. Ogbole said foreign nations and organisations could take the CBN's action as evidence that the country could not be trusted to honour the sanctity of international agreements and the rule of law.

Ogbole, who spoke as a guest on Channels TV, said the apex bank's conduct was baffling. He said: "It gives a very wrong impression of the kind of country we are in, to the international community, because we're talking about sovereignty, rule of law and respect in the comity of states. You're dealing with a country that no less a person that the CBN tells you in the face of an order of the Supreme Court that it will stick to its guns and it doesn't matter what the Supreme Court of the land has said. I'm sure the international community will be wondering what's going on. How can this happen? How are we sure that we could enter into any agreements, any treaty with you? It's a very wrong signal for the image of the country."

Long queues at ATMs in Lagos

Long queues continued yesterday at few Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) dispensing cash to customers in Lagos metropolis. With many banks' ATMs not dispensing cash, the few that had functional ATMs had huge crowd making the banking premises look like a marketplace.

At the Ajose Adeogun branches of the GTBank, Zenith Bank and Standard Chartered Bank, customers formed long queues, waiting patiently to make cash withdrawals. Abiola Adeniran, one of the cardholders, said she was at the Zenith Bank branch since 10am, and was not able to make a withdrawal as at 3pm.

"I came very early in the morning, but up till now, I have not been able to make cash withdrawal. I hope I will be able get cash by the close of business today," he said.

Many other banks with ATMs not dispensing cash for customers were also not paying cash to customers across the counter. The banks maintained earlier stance that they were not handling cash transactions. Many of the customers who went to Keystone Bank, Sterling Bank and Heritage Bank in Lagos, Island, to deposit old naira notes were told to take the notes to the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) branches.

At the Ereko market in Lagos, many traders were still accepting old naira notes. The traders said they will stop using the old notes when the CBN and banks make the new naira notes available. A retailer in household items, sold N50,000 old notes to a PoS operator at N55,000. "That is what is available. Many people just want to have cash to settle their obligations. Until we have the new notes, we will continue to use the old notes," the PoS operator said.

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