

Controversy trails killing of 30 in Benue



The number of persons killed and the cause of the latest mayhem in Benue State yesterday became subjects of controversy in Makurdi and Abuja.

The mayhem which broke out Tuesday in Gbagir, Ukum Local Government Area was said to have continued till the early hours of yesterday.

While Operation Whirl Stroke (OPWS), a military task force covering the Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa states, put the death toll at 30, a traditional ruler said those killed were about 45.

Senator representing Benue Northeast Emmanuel Udende told his colleagues during their plenary that 50 persons were killed.

OPWS which announced that it had commenced clearing operations in the state, attributed the bloodletting to a supremacy battle between local militia leaders. But Udende and a family that lost seven of its members differed, saying armed herders were responsible.

OPWS Force Commander Maj-Gen. Sunday Igbinomwanhia spoke at a news conference addressed by Benue State Deputy Governor Sam Ode at the Government House.

The briefing attended by heads of security agencies in the state was convened to announce to the public that the 14-day ultimatum given to armed herders to leave the state or ranch their cattle had elapsed.

But in a telephone chat with The Nation, Paul, spokesman for the Adzandeh family which lost seven members, said: “I want to say it clearly that those who attacked our community are armed herdsmen and not local militia.”

The Police did not give the number of those who lost their lives. They, however, said eight bodies were recovered from the scene.

The spokesman for the command, Sewuese Anene, added that operatives had been deployed in the area to restore peace and order.

Anene denied knowledge of any ongoing mass burial taking place in the community as was being rumoured.

A security source corroborated Gen. Igbinomwanhia that the violence was caused by militia men.

The source said: “It was militiamen that were killing themselves.

“One or two persons might have been caught in the crossfire, but the majority of the people that were killed were members of militia gangs in the area.

“The villagers know those carrying out this dastardly act but are shielding them.

“We saw several corpses. The attack was not carried out by suspected armed herdsmen. It was a clash between two local militia groups.”

Another source clarified that most of the dead persons were members of rival militia gangs.

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He added that about 12 farmers were caught in the crossfire, while many were still missing.

According to the source, a militia leader in Ukum Local Government Area of Benue went to Chinkai in Wukari Local Government Area in neighbouring Taraba at the weekend and kidnapped a tribal militia leader as well as some of his family members.

“After kidnapping them, he demanded N100 million ransom but was given N5 million. After collecting the money he killed his hostages.

“The murder of the hostages sparked outrage among members of the victims’ gang members in Taraba.

“A different militia gang leader in Ukum, joined forces with the avenging militia gang from Taraba to help to eliminate the Ukum gang leader who abducted and killed his Chinkai community victims.

“The essence was to enable him (the collaborator), to become the head of militia gang in Ukum.”

The source further explained that the combined forces of two different tribal militia gangs moved into Gbagir bushes on Sunday to sack the gang that killed the Taraba militia gang leader.

“On Tuesday morning the bloody fight ensued.

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“From what we have heard, more than 45 persons, mainly bandits have been killed. We also have a record of about 12 farmers who were caught in the crossfire.

“More than 30 others were injured while some are still missing.

“Sadly caught in the crossfire was a family of seven.”

During yesterday’s Senate plenary, Senator Udende called his colleagues’ attention to “attacks on several communities” in Kwande, Ukum, Logo and Katsina-Ala Local Government Areas of Benue state by persons parading themselves as herdsmen.

He said he was “saddened that residents of the villages and communities now find themselves targeted daily by heavily armed terrorist herdsmen.”

The lawmaker added that despite public outcry and previous resolutions of the National Assembly, “there seems to be no visible action on the part of the government to curtail, abate or stop the criminal activities of these elements.”

President of the 9th Senate and Chairman, Senate Committee on Defence, Ahmed Lawan, Enyinnaya Abaribe and Senate Chief Whip, Ali Ndume, in their contributions, called on security agents to halt the killings across the country.

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