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Okhoromi: Unending anguish as thugs shatter community's peace

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The peace in Okhoromi, a rural community in Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State was last Tuesday shattered as an attack by armed thugs left at least five people dead and properties burnt. BANJI ALUKO reports the extent of the loss, saying that normalcy is yet to return.

Okhoromi is a small community in Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State and like a typical

Nigerian village, farming, hunting and petty trading are the major occupations of its people.

However the peace of Okhoromi was last Tuesday rattled and its very foundation shaken. Her scanty population was also decimated after a communal clash left about 5 persons dead in the Tuesday terror. By the time the dust settled, not less than 16 houses and 17 vehicles were said to have been put on fire in Okhoromi by arsonists.

Residents accused the vice chairman of Okhoromi Community Development Association (OCDA), Ovbokhan Igbinovia, of leading thugs to the town after a disagreement with elders of the town.

Chairman of OCDA, Prince Ewuare Erese, said his vice, Igbinovia, drew the ire of the elders of the community after taking sides with his relation, a man identified as Omo'Nedo over the development of land that was acquired by the latter. He said Omo'Nedo wanted to start the foundation of his building without first obtaining due permission from appropriate authorities, something he said was a clear breach of the community's rules. He said elders in the community resisted the move and were about suspending Igbinovia for his actions when he invaded the community with thugs.

Another person, who spoke with Sunday Tribune, said Igbinovia considered what was meted out to Omo'Nedo as a slap on him, saying the act was done to diminish him. The source added that Igbinovia decided to act, hence he tried to wrestle power from the chairman by bringing thugs into

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the community.

The story was corroborated by the Odionwere (community head) of Okhoromi, Pa John Edosomwan. Providing background into the crisis, the Odionwere said OmoNedo was reported to him. He said OmoNedo, a land developer, had disagreement with some people in the community. He alleged that Igbinoia was reported to have taken sides with OmoNedo and together they unleashed mayhem on Okhoromi.

An eyewitnesses, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, simply said the clash was between members of OCDA loyal to the chairman and his vice, who engaged themselves in fight over leadership control. She said spontaneous gunshots were heard on Tuesday during the crisis, pointing out that apart from the people who lost their lives to the occurrence, a good number of persons sustained serious injuries.

"As we speak, the community has been deserted by people for fear of possible reprisals as many cars and buildings were burnt by the combatants," the eyewitnesses said.

Few days after the attacks, many in the town have started to recount their ordeal and count their losses. Prince Erese said his younger brother, Ize Iduriase, and two other persons, including the association's Public Relations Officer (PRO), were shot dead by the hoodlums, adding that people, who were behind the purported removal of the vice chairman and their properties, were particularly targeted.

He said his private residence at neighboring Amagba community was razed along with one of the houses of the head of the community, adding that "at the moment, I do not know where my wife and my four children are."

Izebokun Osafamwen, another victim, said, "I had a house, where I lived with my family. Somebody called me and asked me not to go home that day because the community was on fire. I managed to rescue my children but they burnt my house. I slept in the bush with my family that night. I lost all my certificates in the fire.

Somebody should come to my aid. I don't have money to rent an apartment."

Evelyn Obadiaru recalled that they set her father's house on fire. She said they also searched for him for two days before they finally picked him up in the bush along with his wife.

A poultry farm belonging to an ex-banker in the community was also not left out of the orgy of violence as it was said to have been razed.

The Odionwere said the impact of the crisis could have been reduced if the police had responded to their prompt call.

"When the shooting started, I went through the bush to the police station. I complained but the police did not leave (their station). They demanded for money and we gave them. By the time they got to Okhoromi, we were told that many buildings had already been set on fire," Pa Edosomwan said.

Meanwhile, the army had taken over the town as soldiers were seen all over the community beginning from Wednesday.

The army formation in Benin City also confirmed that lives were lost in the crisis that occurred at Okhoromi on Tuesday. Public Relations Officer of 4 Brigade, Benin City, Capt. Roslyn Managbe, who confirmed the incident on Wednesday, however, said arrests were yet to be made.

"We arrived after the damage had been done. We are on ground to forestall any further crisis and to bring peace back to the community," Managbe said.

The police in Edo State also confirmed the incident. Public Relations Officer (PRO) of the state Police Command, Moses Eguavoen, said the police got the report, adding that two lives were lost in the incident.

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