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## Herdsmen's trail of sorrow, tears and blood

October 18, 2015



Following the controversy in the polity over the position of Yoruba leaders on the menace of herdsmen in the South-West, Abiodun Awolaja reports some of the atrocities of the herdsmen across the country.



Penultimate week, Yoruba leaders of thought issued a warning to the Federal Government on the menace of herdsmen in the South-West, stating that “If the Federal Government fails to stop Fulani herdsmen from attacking Yoruba people, it may result in a situation where the South-west people will have to defend themselves. The Yoruba leaders’ threat came after a gang of Fulani herdsmen abducted a Yoruba traditional ruler and former Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Chief Olu Falae, from his farm on his 77th birthday.

However, although the polity has been in a frenzy since the Yoruba leaders issued their two-week ultimatum to President Muhammadu Buhari over the menace of herdsmen in the South-West, the problem has a long history, and is nationwide. Barely 10 days after the abduction of Chief Olu Falae and on October 1 this year, the herdsmen abducted a traditional ruler from the Yoruba-speaking area of Kogi State, Oba Adebisi Obademi, from his palace in Apa-Bunu in the Kabba-Bunu area of the state and asked the family to pay a ransom. This was just as they released a 70-year-old Yoruba cleric, Pastor Japhet Obafemi who is from Ilepa, Ikare Akoko in Ondo state, after keeping him in captivity for 11 days.

However, two farmers, Mr Agbaose Sowetan from Oja-Odan and Mrs Ayeshi Balogun from Asa village, both in Ogun State, were murdered in cold blood, with Balogun, a mother of three, being gang-raped before being hacked to death. In February 2012, following the incessant crisis between villagers and herdsmen in Yewa North Local Government Area of Ogun State, a delegation of lawmakers paid an impromptu visit to the area, following reports that schools in the area had been deserted by students and teachers for fear of being attacked by the Fulani herdsmen.

A Geography teacher, Mr Yomi Akinola and two students of the Community High School, Ibeku, were among those killed, just as women were raped and killed on their way to the farm. The herdsmen were said to have flown into a rage when they saw that there were no crops on the farms for their cows to feed on. Again, in December 2014, soldiers attached to OP MESA nabbed two Fulani herdsmen from Ngaski area of Kebbi State, Mohammed Umar and Manu Hassan, for robbing motorists on the Lagos-Ibadan expressway, handing them over to the state Special Anti-Robbery Squad. As revealed by the Lagos State police command, the gang of Fulani herdsmen robbers had hideouts in the Abbatoir, Abule Egba and Agege areas of Lagos. In a similar vein, the herdsmen have reportedly attacked farmers and residents in the Oke Ogun axis of Oyo State for years.

The experiences in other southern states have been no less gripping. In August 2013, 23-year-old Ogbonna Eze, a commercial motorcyclist from Opi Community in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu state, was reportedly conveying two Fulani herdsmen from Opi Junction along Enugu -Makurdi expressway to their camp at Idodo Agu Ekwegbe, Igbo Etiti local government when he was struck from behind with a machete. Satisfied that they had wreaked enough damage on his head, the herdsmen abandoned him in a bush path and sped off on his motorbike.

Previously, in Ndokwa local government area of Delta State, 27 persons were reportedly killed in April 2013 after the herdsmen were confronted by youths. The then state governor, Emmanuel Uduaghan, had to forward a bill to the state House of Assembly to protect Deltans from the Fulani herdsmen. Then, on July 21, 2013, five herdsmen wielding AK 47 rifles, ambushed a 14-seater Hiace bus travelling from Onicha-Ugbo to Asaba, Delta state, dispossessing the occupants of their belongings and inflicting machete cuts on them.

Nor has the story changed in the North. The timeline of herdsmen attacks in many of the farming communities in the region is troubling. On January, 1 2014, Fulani herdsmen stormed a church during a vigil in Maikatako, Bokkos local government, Plateau State, killing two people and wounding 16. On the same day, they also killed a man in Manguna area of Bokkos local government. Again, on January 6, 2014, they attacked Shonong Village in Bachit, Riyom, Plateau State, killing 33 villagers and burning 40 houses. On January 20, 2014, they attacked Adeke village, Benue State, killing three persons. By the 31st day of the same month, the marauders killed one Sunday Abin, removed his tongue and cut his wife and five children in pieces in Kaura, Kaduna. In February 2014, they killed 35 persons in Gwer West, Benue State while, in March of the same year, they stormed three villages in Rim District, Riyom, Plateau State, snuffing life out of 10 villagers and burning over 100 houses burnt. The list is endless.

#### **ACF's reaction**

Following Yoruba leaders' threat, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) reacted angrily. A statement issued by ACF National Publicity Secretary, Muhammad Ibrahim, said, "ACF considers Afenifere's statement as reckless and unbecoming of a highly respected group like the Afenifere that chooses to criminalize a whole race or tribe or region instead of the individual criminals, moreover, our law books provides the process of dealing with such suspected criminals rather than arrogating such powers to ourselves. Nigeria has over 250 tribes and Yoruba is just one of them, for it to threaten other tribes just because of an alleged crime of some suspected herdsmen is unnecessary, emotional and contrary to the spirit and letters of the Nigerian constitution which guarantees free movement and association of citizens in any part of the country."

However, according to the senator representing Bayelsa East in the National Assembly, Ben Bruce, more people have died as a result of Fulani/indigene clashes in the last half a decade than have died from terrorist activity occasioned by the Boko Haram terrorist sect. Bruce, proprietor of the popular Silverbird TV, said: "As horrific as individual Boko Haram activities are, they pale in comparison to the barbarous slaughter of over 500 men, women, and children in a single night of terror at Dogo na Hauwa village of Plateau State of 2010. Terrorist activities occasioned by the Boko Haram terrorist group have been largely localised in Nigeria's North-east save for some sporadic attacks in other parts of the North and the Federal Capital Territory. However, Fulani/indigene clashes have occurred in every state of Nigeria bar none! Needless lives have been lost all over Nigeria in these clashes and this will continue in perpetuity if as a nation we do not take steps to change the conditions that give rise to these clashes."

### **Ending the menace**

As narrated Afenifere spokesman, Yinka Odumakin, foremost scholar, Professor Godini Darah, had ruffled many Fulani feathers when he stood up during the debate on cattle grazing at the 2014 National Conference, to speak against the atrocities of Fulani herdsmen against their host communities, noting that apart from destroying farmlands, they were also in the habit of robbing people of their possessions and raping innocent women. Odumakin said: "All manners of verbal daggers flew in Darah's direction as the real owners of the cattle who were in the conference rose in defence of their legmen and the session was to end in confusion until the chairman asked him to withdraw the statement."

According to former Aviation Minister, Femi Fani-Kayode, given the apparent indifference of the Federal Government to the issue, the carnage and tyranny of the Fulani herdsmen may not end any time soon. However, the chairman of the Planning Committee of the Yoruba Leaders' summit and Publicity Secretary of the YUF, Dr Kunle Olajide, told Sunday Tribune that the solution to the herdsmen's menace lies in the adoption of the resolutions of the 2014 National Conference on cattle rearing. He said: "A committee really, seriously tackled this issue of cattle rearing and hustling at the 2014 National Conference because the problem had been in the Middle Belt for so long. We are now having a taste of it in the South-West. And concrete decisions were unanimously adopted by Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo and everybody, that government should establish grazing areas and that cattle rearing should be restricted to such areas."