

FEATURE

Walking through the shadow of death

This certainly is not a good time for many Nigerians. Everywhere across the country one turns, there is death lurking in the shadow. If not through terrorism, banditry and armed robbery, somehow it would strike even through blood thirsty cultists. **OLALEKAN OLABULO, EBENEZER ADUROKIYA, ONYEMA GODWIN, CHUKWUEMEKA OPARA, HAKEEM GBADAMOSI, JOSEPH GODWIN ENNA, ATTAHIRU AHMED and OLAKUNLE MURAF**



THERE is certainly a prevalent gnawing season of death in the country, with all the tragic effects staring all Nigerians in the face. In virtually all parts of the country, various armed gangs have seized the nation by the jugular, killing, maiming and setting homes ablaze, thus ruining the lives of hundreds of thousands of Nigerians.

None of the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja is spared from the activities of the different armed groups that have, in the last few weeks, precipitated carnage and arson across the country. If it is not a case of insurgents killing and committing arson in the North-East in one moment, it is either incidents of bandits killing people and setting homes and other properties ablaze in Zamfara, Kaduna, Borno

and Nasarawa, Ebonyi and Kogi states especially. The act of carnage and arson also appears unabated in Sokoto, where bandits have turned communities into graveyards. The entire scenario depicts that death has become cheap, as gangs lay siege to several quarters of the country. The killings do not preclude the rising cases of extra-judicial killings by state security operatives.

No fewer than 4,000 persons were killed in various violent attacks carried out by either bandits, insurgents and other armed criminals across the country. While no state has been spared the orgy of violence and death, the most hard hit, however, are states like Zamfara, Sokoto, Kaduna, Katsina, Borno, Yobe and Rivers. Between March and the first week of April this year alone, these states have lost hundreds of lives to

one form of violence or another in the gory season of deaths.

Armed banditry

Despite being an erstwhile most peaceful area in the country, Zamfara State has now become one of the most reported states in the media for cattle rustling, killings, kidnapping and other forms of criminality across the 14 Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the state.

For some time now, major parts of the state have become hunting ground for the bandits, who massacre innocent citizens on a daily basis. It was gathered that no fewer than 3,000 innocent people were killed at different locations and properties destroyed. The governor of the state, Abdulaziz Yari, disclosed this much when he

paid a visit to Kawaye, one of the affected communities.

Governor Yari at another event had given a breakdown of the carnage taking place in his state. According to him, while over 3,000 persons had been killed so far, no fewer than 500 villages were also affected and 8,219 persons injured. Over 13,000 hectares of farmlands, he declared, had been destroyed, and could no longer be utilised by farmers.

Indeed, *Sunday Tribune* findings revealed that most residents of communities and villages in Shinkafi, Anka, Tsafe, Gusau, Maradun and Maru LGAs have fled their ancestral homes and moved to urban areas for safety.

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'They are cult members and they also work as errand boys to politicians'



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In early February, reports had it that the bandits sacked several villages in Tsafe LGA, where over 2,000 people, mainly women and their children, were forced to leave their homes and take refuge in two local government councils: Kankara and Faskari of the neighbouring Katsina State.

In another raid on the 4th of February, 13 people, including the elder sister of Senator Kabir Garba Marafa, the honourable representing Zamfara Central Senatorial District, Hajjiya Ade Marafa, were killed by heavily armed bandits at Ruwan Bore village of Gusau LGA of the state.

A resident in the village, Mallam Sani Ahmed, in an interview, narrated how the bandits attacked the communities around 9:00 p.m., set houses ablaze, killed some of their victims just as they kidnapped others like the husband of the slain sister of Senator Marafa, Alhaji Ibrahim, who they believed could fetch them sizable ransom.

Again, on the February 28, 2019, a suspected gang invaded Kwaren Shinkafi village and killed 30 persons. But a resident of the area, identified as Alhaji Bala Abubakar Shinkafi, claimed in an interview that the casualty figure was higher than 30. According to him, the villagers discovered additional 33 bodies dumped by the bandits in the forest two days after the attack, therefore increasing the number of those killed in the community to 63.

Kawaye village in Anka LGA of the state was also not spared, as another gang of bandits invaded the place early April, killing 13 people and abducting the district head, his wife and 58 others.

During the assessment tour by the governor of the state, the Emir of Anka and chairman Zamfara State Council of Chiefs expressed his frustrations and the plight of people of his communities to reporters, while calling on the government to re-deploy more troops with adequate modern firearms that would fight the menace to conclusion.

Killer-cults

Given that cult-related activities have become a common sight in Rivers, except in recent times when its kingpin, Don Wanne, and others like him, were eliminated, Lagos State has also followed suit in becoming notorious for the same vice, which has claimed several lives. While residents of some parts of Lagos State have lately become used to gory pictures of killings by cult members, hoodlums and armed robbers, several incidents have been reported across several LGAs in Rivers State with scores of victims losing their lives and socio-economic activities of affected communities extensively disrupted.

Ikorodu, Somolu, Lagos Island, Ajah, Okokomaiko, Ijora Badia and Mushin have become hotbeds for criminals in the state.

Just some days ago, two people, including a dispatch rider were killed as rival groups of hoodlums clashed in the Fadeyi area. A resident, Tobl Kuti, was also killed by the rampaging hoodlums, who also reportedly cut his head off. It was gathered that the latest violence at Fadeyi was a follow up to the series of attacks and counter attacks by factions of hoodlums in the area.

A resident of Siro area, Dixon, blamed the police and the politicians in the area

for the unending clashes between the two groups. He said: "One group is on Somolu side, while the other group is on Mushin side. They have killed more than eight people in the last six months.

"They are cult members and they also work as errand boys to politicians in Somolu. Some of them are also transport union members. They take advantage of every slightest opportunity to attack each other. The group on the Mushin side has the protection of the police. A police patrol van was stationed in the area and whenever the patrol van was taken away, they would take the advantage to attack their rival on the other side of the road," the resident explained.

In Okokomaiko and its neighbouring communities, some weeks back, three people were gruesomely murdered in a clash between Elye and Aiyee confraternities. But the police swiftly moved into action and a notorious cultist, who has been described as a serial killer, Ibrahim Abdullahi, and a member of his gang were arrested.

Not limited to Mushin or Fadeyi, Ikorodu is another hot spot where cult killings are rampant. Residents of Grammar School area of Ikorodu, for instance, will not forget in a hurry how suspected cult members killed Alowonle Asekun, a resident of the area who was reportedly tracked to the area from Somolu. Asekun was reportedly lured by his assailants who lied to him that they were interested in a puppet that he advertised for sale online. He was subsequently murdered.

Though there has been a lull in cult-related deaths in recent days, this, going by past events could just be an uneasy calm over a gathering storm.

Other states that are also gaining notoriety for cult-related killings and political-induced violence are Delta and Rivers. In Rivers State, for instance, from Obio/Akoor, Emohua, Eleme, Andoni to Ogoni LGAs, the state was painted in a darker shade of red. From Tuesday, April 2, which was described as a horrible day by many, after 12 people, including a paramount ruler of Beere community and the Grassroots Democratic Initiatives (GDI) coordinator in Khana LGA were killed in suspected cult attacks that spread across three different communities, the Rivers has continued to flow wildly causing tears to the families of those slain

by the warring cult groups.

President of the Ogoni Peace Project, Barinua Maxwell Wikoli, said that the affected communities in Ogoniland have been deserted.

Mgbuodohia community, Rumuolumeni clan, and Obio/Akpor LGA of Rivers State have also not been spared the cudgels of the rampaging criminals. The suspected cultists reportedly invaded Obio/Akpor, killing about eight persons. Members of the cult group, it was said, were moving from house to house in search of rival cultists in the area during which they killed eight of their targets.

The effect has been colossal for business in the state. A resident who deals in building materials in the area told our correspondence under anonymity for fear of being attacked that the situation has forced many people to pack out from the community.

"Already people are packing from here," he said, adding that, "if I have money now, I'll move because it was this nonsense that made me to relocate to this place from Omoku. Now, I am finding life difficult because of low patronage."

He added: "I can't pay shop rent anymore because of low sales. As I am here, immediately it's 6 p.m., I will close my shop and go home. So it is too bad," he stated.

While these incidents have led to the declaration of dusk to dawn curfew in some parts of Rivers State, one common cause residents in Lagos and Rivers have claimed for clashes and counter clashes of cult groups is the support and fortifications these miscreants enjoy from politicians in the states involved.

Death from Communal clashes

Unlike in other states, which have been infested by criminals, the situation in Ebonyi is different. The people of the state have been embroiled in boundary dispute with their neighbours, leading to clashes. Whereas no specific number of death has been given, *Sunday Tribune* checks revealed that the matter has been reported to the National Boundary Commission (NBC).

Speaking on the development, Dr Kenneth Ugbala, Commissioner for Border, Peace and Internal Security, berated the National Boundary Commission (NBC) for

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