

# Bullets, Blood And Tears In Unending 'War' Between Ilaje And Ajah In Lagos

•We are in a war situation, they want to take our land —Ilaje people •They are cultists, they've turned us to refugees in our land —Ajah people

By **OLALEKAN OLABU...** On Jul 6, 2019

WEEKEND LAGOS



*Inexplicably, the lingering bloody crisis has been largely kept out of public view. But deaths are being constantly recorded, with a growing IDP colony to boot. OLALEKAN OLABULO went deep into the heart of the bloodshed.*

ISALE Ijebu and Ilaje are two communities between posh Victoria Garden City and Ajah, but the current crisis situation in the two Lagos communities is similar to the widespread insecurity in the north-eastern part of the country. For reasons yet to be established, the devastating impact of the ongoing war between the Ilaje and Isale Ijebu communities is not attracting the urgent attention it should get, considering the magnitude of the bloody clashes in a state that is not experiencing a war.

Residents are daily fleeing the communities, while those who have decided to stay behind have become internally displaced persons and refugees.

Three policemen have been shot by the warring neighbours, while no fewer than seven people have been killed since the clash escalated again about two months ago. The situation is more worrisome with the fact that the police are working on a report that one of the communities brought in militants from the South-South geopolitical zone of the country. No one has yet been indicted.

**87-year-old Ben Nwabueze leads Atiku's legal team at tribunal**

## VGC as a facade

VGC, as Victoria Garden City is fondly called, and Ajah are two communities with modern architectural edifices and infrastructures but the two communities between them, Isale Ijebu and Ilaje, are nothing but a neglected slum. Apart from the fact that these two communities lack basic amenities, they share just a primary school and a secondary school.



The situation in Ilaje and Isale Ijebu areas of Ajah is one communal crisis that has resulted in students not going to school, traders not going to the markets and churches and mosques not opening for worship. Residents who have social engagements have been forced to postpone or cancel them.

Saturday Tribune investigations revealed that the crisis might not be unconnected with a vast expanse of land which at present is being occupied by the Ilajes on a riverine area with a mechanised dredging site. There have been accusations and counter-accusations from

both communities on who is bullying who and who caused the crisis.

A senior police officer in the area who spoke with Saturday Tribune under the condition of anonymity said that although both communities have been at war since 2011, relative peace was restored in the area until two months ago when hostility was renewed.

“It is a serious war between the two communities and they will not mention a single name. This community will be blaming the other, while people are being killed and houses are being destroyed,” the police chief said. He, however, blamed the crisis on the allegations by the Ilajes that the Ajah people were planning to take over their community and turn it into a modern estate.

## Our story –Ilajes

Reverend Oduwale Oluwasegun, the public relations officer of the Ilaje indigenes in Ajah, spoke with Saturday Tribune on the raging war: “We have been here since 1886. This was proved by the tribunal that was set up on the last Ajah crisis. Our forefathers bought this land from them. Many of our people relocated to this area after the demolition of Moba in 1984 and Maroko in 1990. The waterside area was bought from the Aberoje family by the Olori Ebi, who resold it to the Ilajes.”

He said trouble started in 2011 “when they wanted to change the name of this area to Aberoje Street from the initial Ilaje Street. This action led to serious crisis and about 57 houses belonging to Ilaje people were burnt, while seven people were killed at that time. On 27th May, 2019, the Ajah boys invaded Ilaje where they looted properties, burnt houses and killed Mr Kehinde whose corpse is still lying in the mortuary. There was a day that four armed men from Ajah came into the community from a corner by the second transformer at the waterside. They shot repeatedly into different directions. They attacked a trader and collected N150,000 from her.

“The soldiers that came to our rescue on the 22nd of June, 2019 arrested two Ajah boys with guns and other dangerous weapons and those boys are being sponsored by the people who want to take over our land and build an estate on it. We have it on good authority that they want to send us away and build an estate on this land.”

On the latest crisis, the Ilaje spokesperson said, “The dredger company started working on the Ilaje water in 2015. The Ilajes did not benefit from them until the ones that came in October 2018 and out of the nine sites in Ilaje waterside, Ajah is controlling six, while three were given to the Ilajes. Even at that, their Baale still claims royalties on the three sites that are given to the Ilajes. The Ajah community has painted the Ilajes black before all Eti Osa indigenes and Lagosians as a whole. Is Ilaje not a dialect under Yoruba again?

“We had a peace meeting with the Area Commander, DPO and council chairman of Eti Osa Local Government and other stakeholders and at the end of the meeting, the two communities signed a peace accord on the 20th of June, 2019. A day after the signing of the peace accord, the Ajah people invaded Ilaje again and shot four people, including a policeman.”

### **‘We are in war situation here’**

A member of the executive of the Ilaje union, who identified himself simply as Mr Irejuwa, described the situation in the area as war-like. He said on a daily basis, people were moving out of the area for fear of becoming the next victim. Many residents turn my house to an IDP camp whenever the Ajah boys invade our community.

“It is more worrisome that our children can no longer go to school. The only primary and secondary schools in the two communities are situated in a single compound in Olomu. Our children have not been going to school since the latest crisis started. They were harassed and intimidated by hoodlums around the school. Our women were sent away from the markets. That is the only market in this area.”

A resident of Ilaje, Ayo Ebiesuwa, said the situation had gone beyond what the government could ignore. The fish trader claimed that she and other traders from Ilaje were sent away from the Ajah market by fellow women from the Ajah end, saying, “They sent us away with canes. They told us not to come to their market again.”

Adesoji Omotoyole, a 19-year-old SS 1 student also said, “I have been attacked three times on my way to school. It was either the hoodlums or some of my mates in school that harassed us. They accused my brother of being one of the people who are fighting for the Ilaje people.”

Ade Kolawole, a tailor, while sharing his experience of the continuous communal crisis said, "It has been very difficult for most of the youth in Ilaje now. They cannot go out without being attacked. We now go out through Berger instead of the nearby Ilaje Bus stop. Our youth don't work again. I am a tailor and most of my customers are in Ajah. I cannot go to them now."



### **Ilajes crying wolf –Ajah**

Reacting to all the allegations against the Ajah people, the secretary general of the community, Kazeem Odunlami, said the Ilajes are only crying wolf where there is none. He added that it was the Ilajes that had been attacking, raping, robbing and killing the Ajah people who, according to him, are the rightful owners of all the land in the area.

Odunlami not only denied that students were being chased back home from schools, but also that the Ilajes have been allegedly invading Ajah with external

forces through the waterways. He also claimed that many residents have been rendered homeless as a result of the attacks on their homes.

"We are the host community and they are not disputing that. We are not fighting with them over any land. They are the ones causing problem. The authority over the land in Ajah lies with our Baale. The clash usually starts with them. They are cultists and they belong to different groups. They always attribute clashes between their rival cult groups to us. We don't have to fight them over any land. Initially, we could not fathom what their grouse with us was but we realised later that they are entertaining fears that we want to take over their land and build an estate. One of them said it during one of our meetings. They are the ones bringing people through the waterways to attack us," the Ajah town secretary said.

The community scribe added: "When they wanted to start the dredging business, they brought dredgers to the palace here and the Baale gave them his blessings. They said that they wanted to start mechanised dredging in the area and we did not disagree with them. For three years, nothing was brought to our Baale despite the fact that he has the right to collect royalties there. There are factions among them. They are fighting over the dredging site. Our Baale had been arrested following fictitious petitions from them in the past and he was always vindicated. He has no interest in their land. The latest crisis started between two brothers of the same father from their end. The two brothers belong to different cults and a clash ensued between the two groups at a naming ceremony on their side."

**'We are refugees in our land'**

Alhaji Kabiru Yekeen, secretary of the Ojupon/Ogunsemo ruling house in Ajah, also denied the claims by the Ilajes. He said instead, the Ajah indigenes were daily becoming refugees in their own land following constant attacks from the Ilajes.

“They are acting on the rumour that we want to take over their land. They act on that to attack our people wherever and whenever they find them. Only a few weeks back, one of our youth, Oloyo, was killed and his corpse burnt. Those who attempted to recover his body were also shot. They hide under cultism to attack us,” Alhaji Yekeen said.

Alhaji Rasak Odunlami, the Baba Oja of Ajah, also denied that any trader from Ilaje was sent out of the market. The Babaloja said the Ilajes were only using the claim that they were being sent out of the market to get unnecessary sympathy from the public.

He claimed that there were many ethnic groups even in Ilaje and that there was no way the market women in Ajah would have identified and singled out Ilaje women for expulsion from the market.

### **Wives raped in husbands' presence?**

It was also tales of woe from residents of Isale Ijebu as their houses were also allegedly burnt and destroyed by rampaging Ilaje militants, while their women were also reportedly raped in the presence of their husbands.

A trader in Ajah, Mrs Bilikis Eshinlokun, called on the Lagos State government to urgently intervene in the plight of the people of the area. The trader said a man, whose wife and daughter were raped, had relocated from the area.

“I have also abandoned my house for these people. They come with dangerous weapons, shooting and attacking people. They robbed, raped and attacked many residents of Isale Ijebu. I cannot sleep in this place again. I come out in the morning and return to sleep in another place in the evening. The government should act fast,” Mrs Eshinlokun said.

A student of Olomu Secondary School who pleaded for anonymity, in a chat with Saturday Tribune, also denied that the students who stayed away from school were chased away by hoodlums even though almost all the students from Ilaje had not been coming to school.

“One or two of them are still coming to school. Many of them have stopped coming since the clash started but nobody stopped them from coming to school. Maybe they are afraid of being attacked,” she said.

The image maker of the state police command, Bala Elkana, told Saturday Tribune that the police in the state had taken necessary measures to prevent recurrence of such clashes and restore the confidence of the two communities in the police.

“The Commissioner of Police, Zubairu Muazu, personally visited the communities and met with the leaders of the two communities and assured them of the readiness of the police to put a total end to the crisis. The commissioner had immediately created a buffer point for policemen to permanently stay in the communities till the crisis is completely





over. Mobile and anti-riot policemen and Armoured Personnel Carrier have been deployed in the two communities,” Elkana said.

The police spokesperson denied the allegation that policemen were taking sides with one of the communities.

“It is not fair for anybody to say that the police are taking sides with any of the communities. It is the duty of the police to protect all citizens,” he explained

A senior police source in Ajah Area Command, while speaking with Saturday Tribune, said: “The Area Commander reacted to reports that some people were bringing militants from the Niger Delta to attack the other community. One of our men was shot. One needs to be very careful. Look at the terrain in Ilaje, it is very difficult to go in there and arrest anybody. The whole place may be engulfed in violence and it may get out of hand.”