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A victim recuperating at the hospital. INSECT: before being taken to the hospital

THE SOUTH WEST

How Court Judgement Drove Ikale, Araromi Obu Communities In Ondo To Violence

By **HAKEEM GBADAMOSI** On Jul 30, 2019

After spending 15 years in court on a disputed land, judgement however drove Ikale and Araromi Obu communities to violence which necessitated the state governor, Rotimi Akeredolu, to seek path to peace. HAKEEM GBADAMOSI reports.

Violence broke out on Tuesday last week between the Ikale community in Okitipupa Local Government Area of Ondo State and Araromi community in Odigbo Local Government Area of the state over ownership of land, leaving at least four persons dead and properties worth millions of naira destroyed in the agrarian community of Araromi Obu.

The pandemonium brought economic and social activities to a standstill while some residents fled their homes. Some vehicles and houses were torched during the melee. But for the intervention of the governor, Mr. Rotimi Akeredolu, and the security agencies in the state, the crisis would have escalated beyond what was witnessed.

The relationship between the two communities had been frosty for some years on account of ownership of a large expanse of land in Araromi Obu. The Ikale people have been laying claim as the rightful owners of the land which houses a rubber plantation company.

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The indigenes of Araromi had earlier resisted the invasion by approaching a court of law in order to avoid periodic breakdown of law and order between them and their traducers. However, rather than dousing the tension in the land, it was aggravated with an Akure court resolving the dispute in favour of the people of Ikale.

The court, presided by Justice Olanrewaju Akeredolu, granted the customary ownership of the expanse of land where the plantation is located and many other lands in dispute to the Ikale.

The judgement was delivered 15 years after the case was instituted by the traditional ruler of Araromi-Obu, Oba Aderemi Adelola against his counterpart in Ikoya, Oba George Faduyile.

Apart from the land in question, the court also ceded Ajebamidele, Aiyesan, Tenola, Koseru, Oniparaga, Kajola, Imorun, Laleipa, Aiyetimbo, Ajebambo, Adewinle, Akinseye, Okefara, Omowole, Agoidogun, Obadoore, Ogunlepa, Onipetesi, Mile 49, Labon, Temidire, Sakoto 1 and 11, Basola 1 and 11, Ago Alaiye, Ayetoro 1 and II, and Onitea to the Ikale people.

Others included Enujowo, Agirifon 1 and II, Igo, Sidigi, Komowa, Oke-Ojakoparun, Lokuta Libara, Araromi Oil Palm Estate Camp, Fesojoye 1, Oduduwa village, Mogaji Village, Chief Marcel's village, Ajibodu and Bolorunduro 1 and II.

Justice Akeredolu, in her verdict, held that the defendants had by traditional history been able to prove that the disputed land belonged to them. According to her, "I hold that they (defendants) are entitled to the customary right of occupancy over the lands."

With the court declaration, the people of Ikale wasted no time in enforcing the judgment despite an appeal filed by the Araromi Obu community to challenge the ruling of the lower court at the Appeal Court.

The development, Nigerian Tribune learnt, led to a peace meeting called at the instance of the state government, warning the two sides to maintain peace until the outcome of the Court of Appeal ruling. But Ikale representatives of the community were alleged to have invaded Araromi community.

A resident farmer of Araromi Obu, Mr. Akinfemi Akinselu, explained that no fewer than 12 people were injured during the invasion while four others were pronounced dead during the attack, including the burning of some houses. According to him, the crisis has been raging between the two communities, before a High Court sitting in Akure, Ondo capital, ruled in favor of Ikale community.



A victim recuperating at the hospital

He explained that the Ikale people have been threatening to forcefully take back the land after the court injunction which favoured them, despite the appeal filed by the Araromi Obu community. According to him, the indigenes of the community fled their homes over fear of being attacked by the people of Ikale, saying that "the people moved from house to house, looting goods and property of the people."

He however linked the crisis to the many resources in the area, saying the residents and indigenes of Araromi Obu are mainly cocoa farmers and the land was fertile. He said apart from this, the rubber plantation was one of the main causes of friction between the two communities.

The clash however, took another dimension on Wednesday, as the traditional ruler of Araromi Obu, Oba Aderemi

Adelola, was attacked by some hoodlums, while returning home from a peace meeting called by the state government in Akure. The traditional ruler was said to have escaped death by a whisker as his convoy was attacked by the hoodlums.

While speaking during a press conference, the president of Araromi-Obu Development Union, Senator Omololu Meroyi disclosed that two indigenes of the town had been killed, eight others were injured with so many others chased out of the community. According to him, no fewer than five houses were burnt at Ago-Alaye community. He disclosed the Araromi-Obu people have been under severe attack by their Ikale neighbours over the judgment of an Akure High Court that ceded part of their land to Ikale people.

According to him, "our experiences have been bitter in the last two weeks. Some people want to drive us away from our land. These people were born in Araromi Obu, they lived with us and never claimed to be landlords.

"There is a court judgment that ceded our lands to Ikale people. Rather than wait for the law to take its course, these people have taken laws into their hands. We will not cede an inch of our land to anybody. It is not that we cannot fight back, but we did not want to contribute to the security challenges in the country. We appeal to men of goodwill to come to our aid before the situation gets out of hand."

Speaking on behalf of the Ikale people, High Chief Jacob Akeremale, alleged that the people of Araromi Obu were the aggressors, arguing that they were exhibiting their displeasure over the judgment of the High Court by attacking Ikale people. According to him, "we are not the aggressors; the crisis should not be traced to us. We are law abiding and peaceful people and cannot take law into our hands."

He said the people of Araromi Obu started the attack on Ikale people who were ready to take over the land "but since they have approached the Appeal Court, we put on hold taking over the land. We informed the security operatives in our area when we noticed these attacks and also the state commissioner of police while we were all called to a peace meeting. The governor assured us that a committee would be put in place over the crisis between the two communities but the security operatives keep arresting our people indiscriminately while the people of Araromi Obu move freely around."

Asked if there are proofs or evidence to be presented by the community to back up their claim over the ownership of land in Araromi Obu, he said "we are relying on the judgment of the court and the court cannot be wrong. We want the government to be fair in handling the situation and all those arrested should be released. The governor has appealed to the two sides and we are ready to be peaceful pending the outcome of the judgment."

Within 24 hours after the violence, the death toll had risen to four with many casualties. The state governor, Akeredolu, ordered the imposition of a 24-hour curfew on Ago-Alaye town.

According to a release which was signed by the state Commissioner for Information, Mr. Donald Ojogo, the order followed preliminary reports received in the wake of the violent clash which resulted in the loss of lives and property in the area.

Ojogo said the decision was taken in the overall interest of the inhabitants of the area as well as adjoining towns and villages, saying there is need to prevent the unfortunate incident from escalating. "All inhabitants in the affected area are enjoined to take maximum advantage of this step being taken by obeying the order. Security agencies are by this action mandated to enforce the curfew to the fullest," the release said in part.



Governor Akeredolu addressing residents of Araromi Obu during his visit to the town.

In order to restore normalcy to the area, governor Akeredolu visited the two communities, insisting that the state government would not condone any act of criminality. He disclosed that the 24 hour curfew on Ago-Alaye town was part of the measures to prevent the escalation of the violence. Speaking at the palace of the Ajobu of Araromi Obu, the governor assured the traditional ruler and the people of the town of maximum security of lives and properties, saying the state government would not hesitate to deal with anybody

found culpable if the violence persists.

Addressing the youths in the town, Akeredolu pleaded with them not to take laws into their hands while he vowed to bring the perpetrators of the criminal acts to book.

Oba Adelola, while responding, commended the governor for his prompt action and assured him that people and residents of the community would continue to remain calm and cooperate with the security agents.

The governor who also visited the palace of Abodi of Ikale land, Oba George Babatunde Faduyile, pleaded with the traditional rulers in Ikale land to call their subjects in Ago Alaye to order. Akeredolu disclosed that the state government would set up a committee to look into the involvement of the two sides of the conflict, warning that his administration would not tolerate criminality under any guise.

The governor, who was in the town to assess the level of destruction, was accompanied by the Commissioner of Police, Mr Undie Adie, the Brigade Commander of the 32 Artillery Brigade, Brigadier General Zakari Logun Abubakar and other security chiefs. The state Police Public Relations Officer, (PPRO) Mr. Femi Joseph said the command has been able to put the situation under control, adding that mobile policemen had been drafted to the community to restore peace in the area.

According to him, apart from the mobile policemen, local policemen from Okitipupa Area Command have also been drafted to the area to complement the team.

"We have drafted our men to the area to restore normalcy. Some people have been arrested by our men in connection with the crisis. We have been able to restore peace to the community while the command has begun investigation," he said.

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