

Blood, sorrow, tears in Owo as gunmen attack Catholic Church, many killed

•We will hunt down assailants —Akeredolu •Eternal sorrow awaits perpetrators —Buhari

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SORROW and anguish were all over Owo town in Owo Local Government Area of Ondo State on Sunday as some unidentified gunmen attacked St. Francis Catholic Church in Owaluwa area of the town, killing over 50 members of the congregation while several others were left injured.

The armed men invaded Governor Rotimi Akeredolu's hometown in a Volkswagen Golf 4, struck around 11:15 a.m. at the peak of the service.

According to an eyewitness, people tried to run to avoid being shot.

He said the gunmen threw dynamites into the church, which blew off the altar, before they started shooting indiscriminately at worshippers.

The eyewitness said about 500 people were in the church when the gunmen attacked, adding that no fewer than 50 were killed with several others injured in the attack.

The figures have however not been confirmed.

There were blood stains on the floor of the church as corpses and the injured were said to have been moved to the Federal Medical Centre, Owo, while some corpses were said to have been deposited at a private hospital.

One of the priests, Reverend Father Andrew Abayomi, said the gunmen operated for about 25 minutes, shooting into the church, adding that "we were about to round off service. I had even asked people to start leaving when we started hearing gunshots from different angles."

"We hid inside the church. Some people had left when the attack happened. We locked ourselves in the church for 20 minutes. When we heard that they had left, we opened the



church and rushed victims to the hospital."

Another witness, Taiwo Kasali, a motorcyclist, said he was approaching the church when he saw the people scampering for safety, adding that he saw four men boarding a Volkswagen car.

He said some men of the Amotekun Corps chased the gunmen, adding that he learnt the gunmen abandoned their vehicle and ran away.

The Bishop of Ondo Diocese, Bishop Jude Arogundade, during his visit to the scene of the attack, said, "this is madness. All over the world, there is nowhere people will plan to come and kill babies, children, husband and wife worshipping on a special day, the Pentecost day."

"It is quite unbelievable that some individuals will go to the church with the intention of killing everybody. Those who were trying to escape were shot from outside while those who were

inside were being shot inside. They threw dynamites to blow off the altar. This kind of desecration can only be done by the evil ones."

"Probably what the world should know is that Nigeria is in war and this kind of war is directed at civilians. I don't know what point someone is trying to make with this kind of evil act but whatever point they intended to make, they have not made it and they have not achieved anything unfortunately."

Governor Akeredolu, who expressed shock and shed tears while at the scene of the incident, promised that the perpetrators would be arrested soon.

The governor, who had to leave his assignment as chairman of the security committee of the All Progressives Congress (APC) convention in Abuja, to assess the situation, appealed to the people to be calm and not take laws into their hands.

The governor said the

vile and satanic attack is a calculated assault on the peace-loving people of Owo Kingdom who have enjoyed relative peace over the years.

Akeredolu said, "It is a black Sunday in Owo. Our hearts are heavy. Our peace and tranquility have been attacked by the enemies of the people. This is a personal loss, an attack on our dear state."

"I have spoken to the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Ondo, Most Reverend Jude Arogundade, who is presently on his way to Owo. Similarly, I have had to cut short my party's national assignment in Abuja and visit Owo immediately."

"This is an unexpected development. I am shocked to say the least. Nevertheless, we shall commit every available resource to hunt down these assailants and make them pay. We shall never bow to the machinations of heartless elements in our resolve to rid our state of criminals."

"I commiserate with my people in Owo, particularly families of those who lost their lives to this unfortunate attack. I extend my condolences to the Olowo of Owo, Oba Gbadegesin Ogunoye, as well as the Catholic Church."

"I urge our people to remain calm and vigilant. Do not take laws into your hands. I have spoken to the heads of the security agencies. I have equally been assured that security operatives would be deployed to monitor and restore normalcy to Owo kingdom."

Condemning the attack, the Catholic Diocese of Ondo, in a statement signed by its Director of Social Communications, Reverend Father Augustine Ikwu, said "it is so sad to say that while the Holy Mass was going on, unknown gunmen attacked St. Francis Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State, leaving many feared dead and many others injured and the church violated."

"The identity of the perpetrators remains unknown

while the situation has left the community devastated."

However, for now, security agencies have been deployed to the community to relatively handle the situation. At this point in the history of our dear country Nigeria, we need God's ultimate intervention to restore peace and tranquility," he said.

He however said all the priests and bishop in the parish are safe, none kidnapped, adding that, "nonetheless, let us continue to pray for them and the good people of Owo and the state at large."

Former governor of Ondo State, Dr Olusegun Mimiko, condemned the attack and called for urgent action, saying the attack on unarmed worshippers is "an assault on our humanity and bludgeons our sensibilities."

Mimiko, in a statement by John Paul Akinduro, his special assistant on media and digital communications, described the Owo massacre as a condemnable act and called on the state government to take "immediate action to mobilise all available healthcare assets to Owo and if the need be, call for assistance from neighbouring states so as to be able to save as many as possible of those who were wounded in the attack."

He said, "I have placed a call through to Kabiyesi to commiserate with him and the good people of Owo kingdom on the huge loss recorded from the attack. I have also contacted the state government to express my condolences and solidarity in the face of this unimaginable terror attack."

The state police command confirmed the attack but said it would give the full details later.

The state police image maker, Funmi Odunlami, said, "we want to implore the people of the state to be calm as all security apparatus is currently active to ensure peace in the area."

Reactions over attack on Ondo church