

Naira scarcity: Violence rocks southern cities

- 2 killed, many injured in Lagos, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway blocked
- Motorists attacked in Port Harcourt • Banks disburse old N200 notes

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PROTESTS erupted again on Friday in several cities across the South in furtherance of the unease trailing the protracted naira scarcity in the country.

The protests were recorded in Lagos and several towns in Ogun State, including Ifo. There were also pockets of protests in Ibadan, Oyo State and Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Two persons were killed and many others injured in demonstrations that turned ugly in areas between Lagos and Ogun states.

The protests followed widespread rejection of the old N1,000 and N500 notes after Thursday's nationwide broadcast by President Muhammadu Buhari wherein he insisted that the bills were no longer legal tender in the country.

The protests were also partly fuelled by the inability of customers to deposit their old N1,000 and N500 notes in commercial banks.

The dead victims were a lotto shop cashier and a driver who were hit by stray bullets from soldiers who were trying to disperse angry protesters who blocked the Mowe and Ibafo axes of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway.

Police and military operatives had a hectic day in Awoyaya, Lekki, Ketu, Mile 12, Epe, Sango Ota, Ifo, Abule Egba, Fagba, Alakuko, Agege, Airport Road, Ikotun and Iyana Ipaja as unruly protesters vandalised banks in some of the areas.

There were sporadic gunshots in the affected areas as adamant protesters ignored pleas by security agencies to leave the road and return to their various homes.

An unidentified commercial bus driver who parked his vehicle around Mowe to monitor the tensed situation in the area and a female cashier working at a lotto shop were felled by stray bullets.

In the early hours of the day, in Ketu and Mile 12 markets, buyers were reportedly met with disappointment on the rejection of the old naira notes.

The arguments that ensued between buyers and sellers on the rejection of the old naira notes were said to have resulted in a protest which was promptly hijacked by hoodlums who took to the

Ikorodu Expressway and set bonfires on the road.

The hoodlums reportedly used the opportunity to vandalise vehicles and attack people. Soldiers and policemen later dispersed the violent protesters with teargas.

In Epe and Awoyaya, branches of three new generation banks were vandalised by protesters who complained of unavailability of the new naira notes.

Saturday Tribune noticed a massive deployment of security operatives, especially in areas where banks are concentrated.

The *News Agency of Nigeria* (NAN) reported that about four banks were vandalised by suspected hoodlums in the town around 10.05 a.m.

The affected financial institutions included Polaris Bank, United Bank for Africa, Zenith Bank and First Bank.

NAN reported that the police, however, intervened at the scene to restore normalcy in the area.

It also reported that efforts to speak with the Divisional Police Officer and some bank managers proved abortive.

But the Assistant Inspector General of Police in charge of Lagos and Ogun states, Mr Abiodun Alabi, said the police were able to manage the situation.

AIG Alabi said, "We have made adequate deployment in not just the banks but in all financial institutions. It is our statutory responsibility to do that."

The Mowe-Ibafo-Magboro axis of Ogun State was thrown into pandemonium with the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway blocked by protesters.

The protest halted commercial activities in Mowe, Ofada, Magboro.

As news of the riot spread into the inner streets, traders and shop owners hurriedly shut down.

Parents were also seen running helter-skelter to pick their children from schools while schools locked their gates against intruders and made frantic efforts to calm the parents who had besieged their premises.

Some schools in Magboro resorted to using various means to send messages to parents to assure them of the safety of their children.

In one of the schools, the management sent a message to parents. The message reads: "Valued parents, we are aware of the protest/unrest around us presently. We are monitoring the situation and by God's grace, our

children are safe. Please, stay safe."

Another private primary school wrote: "Parents are to call/send message to telephone/WhatsApp number of the school. We will confirm information/situation around Magboro, Arepo and environs on the reported protest/unrest before closing time (1.00 p.m.) today to guide us as to releasing our children. God will keep us by His power. Management."

Another school wrote: "Dear parents of JS3/SS3 students, be informed that Saturday classes will not hold tomorrow, 18th February, 2023. Thanks for your understanding. May the peace of God be upon our nation."

"Any parent that wishes to pick their child before official closing time of 1.00 p.m. today should visit the school in person or call any of the sectional head if you are sending someone. Thanks."

Saturday Tribune also monitored the situation in places like Abule-Egba, Agbado-Ijaiye, Alakuko and observed that students of both public and private schools in the axis were affected.

Also, many shop owners in the axis, including POS operators and particularly those whose shops are located near major bus stops such as Ijaiye, Kollington and Alakuko, hurriedly closed their shops for fear of being attacked by the rioters.

Some of the schools visited by *Saturday Tribune* include Ijaiye Ojokoro Junior and Senior Colleges and Ijaiye Housing Estate Junior and Senior Secondary Schools as well as several private schools, all under Ifako-Ijaiye Local Government Area of the state.

The students were seen going home around 11.45 a.m. against their normal 1.00 p.m. closing time on Fridays.

Some of them told *Saturday Tribune* that their teachers asked them to go home as the naira scarcity protests were spreading fast and they would not want them to be trapped in schools.

They said they were equally told that there would be a one-week midterm vacation from next Friday.

But when contacted, the Head of Public Affairs at the state's Ministry of Education, Mr Ganiu Lawal, said he was not aware of any directive asking students to go home before their 1.00 p.m. closing time on Friday.

There were also protests in Iwowe and Ibafo where motorists were turned back and okada riders were seen

attaching leaves to their motorcycles to show solidarity with the protesters.

Residents who had gone to banks to make withdrawals said they could not access their money. This led to agitations as traders also refused to collect the old naira notes. Some even refused money transfer from customers due to internet failures.

A respondent in Magboro, Mrs Mary Egbewole, said she had paid for some goods she bought through money transfer since 7.00 a.m. but she could not leave the shop as the trader was yet to receive any credit alert.

"The bank had debited my account since 7.00 a.m. but it is yet to credit the account of the trader as of 11.00 a.m. I have to wait till she receives her money."

"I tried to visit the bank's branch but the bank is not attending to customers. In fact, the bank has closed its doors to customers," Egbewole said.

However, the protesters were dispersed by a military patrol team which fired shots into the air to scare them away.

Also, residents of Ifo blocked the Ifo end of the Abeokuta-Lagos Expressway to protest the hardship they were facing over the scarcity of the new notes.

The protest started as early as 8.00 a.m. at Ifo when residents could not access their money inside banking halls and at the ATMs points.

Most of the commercial banks did not open for businesses for fear of being attacked.

In Ibadan, Oyo State, a combined team of security agents demonstrated a "show of force" around the city to inform the residents of their preparedness to ward off any attempt by individuals or group to embark on any violent protest.

The team, which included policemen, soldiers and men of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, during the exercise, ran into protesters at Iwo Road, in Ibadan North East Local Government Area.

It succeeded in calming the protesters, mainly youths, who took to the streets in protest of the unavailability of the new naira notes.

It was learnt that after they were persuaded by the security operatives, the protesters withdrew from the streets and business and other commercial activities resumed in the area.

The Police Public Relations Officer in the state, Adewale

Osifeso, could not be reached for comment.

Similarly, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, protesters had blocked several roads as early 8.00 a.m.

The protesters temporarily blocked the Ikwerre Road area of Mile 3 and Mile 2 Diobu.

There were reports of hoodlums chasing people and robbing them and making bonfires on the highway in Mile 3.

A student of the Rivers State University who gave his name simply as Victor said he had to make a detour after he noticed that people were running away from the axis where the school main gate is located.

Saturday Tribune learnt that the protest degenerated into a riot which spread to Emekike Street, Okija and forced drivers to abandon their vehicles and flee to safety.

The hoodlums capitalised on the ensuing pandemonium to rob motorists and pedestrians of their valuables, including cash, smart phones and wallets.

The protest was also said to have later spread to Aggrey Road in Port Harcourt where some ATMs were destroyed.

The situation did not continue for a long time as the police deployed patrol teams in the affected areas and brought the situation under control.

Speaking with *Saturday Tribune*, a resident who did not want to disclose his name said: "At about 9.00 a.m., I was inside the house at Ikoku when my wife called me from outside. I came out and saw people running and scampering for safety."

"Some boys were chasing people. I don't know who they were. Buses and cars on the road were speeding. I saw bonfires at Ikoku Roundabout, near the new flyover."

"There was no police presence. The only people I saw trying to put out the fire was the security men attached to Anglican Church in Ikoku because of the burial of a prominent man's wife."

"Those boys were robbing people, collecting handsets. They said they were protesting because of this money issue."

It was learnt that two of the hoodlums were later arrested by a local vigilante group.

One of the robbery victims, Miss Favour Harcourt said: "During the protest, a group of guys came to our driver when he was trying to reverse at Ikoku Junction. They swooped on him, broke his windows and started beating him up. When I was trying to get out of the

vehicle, one the guys held me and stabbed my hand. He then took my phone and wallet and ran away."

"As he was running, the Diobu Vigilante operatives caught him and recovered my phone. They arrested him."

In a reaction, the police in the state confirmed the incidents.

They said tactical teams were on the ground and normalcy had been restored in the trouble areas.

Meanwhile, the Lagos State governor, Mr Babajide Sanwo-Olu, expressed concern over the protests in some parts of the state due to naira scarcity that has caused so much hardship and confusion among the citizens.

The governor said there was no need for such "as the Supreme Court is looking into this controversial matter and will make its position known on February 22."

Sanwo-Olu, in a statement made available to newsmen by his Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Mr Gbenga Omotoso, also noted that the fuel situation was easing following some steps taken by the state government.

He said his government had "since joined the legal dispute – all in the interest of our people – in the belief that the highest court in the land has the capacity to adjudicate on the matter."

Sanwo-Olu, while assuring residents that he was "working with his colleagues to ensure that this hardship does not go on," commended them for showing understanding despite the pains that the Federal Government's measures had brought.

He urged the residents to continue to be law-abiding by shunning any form of incitement by mischief makers.

Also, the Ogun State governor, Prince Dapo Abiodun, called for calm among residents of the state.

Abiodun, while addressing residents at a branch of a new generation bank in Abeokuta, urged outlets and other businesses operators to collect the old notes from people in exchange for goods and services.

He noted that there was an existing order by the Supreme Court directing that the old notes remain legal tender in the country.

The governor vowed to revoke the certificate of occupancy of any corporation or store that rejects the old naira notes from members of the public in the state.