

FEATURES

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Kogi under siege: Killer herders, kidnappers on rampage

YEKINI JIMOH writes about how the spate of terror attacks have spread from the core north to communities in especially Kogi West and Kogi East Senatorial districts in recent time, costing thousands of people their lives and sustenance.

FOR quite some time now Kogi State, particularly Kogi West and Kogi East Senatorial districts, have been facing security problems following the invasion of killer herders and kidnappers who are on rampage in the state.

The insecurity situation is in contrast to what it was during the tenure of former governor of the state, Alhaji Yahaya Bello. The then administration was able to curtail the situation by bringing the criminals to their knees.

However, today, in those districts, people can no longer go to bed with both eyes closed. Farmers can no longer go to farm while travellers within the state and those passing through are always full of prayers.

The affected communities include Kupa, Tajimi, Ogbalbon in Lokoja Local Government Area (LGA), and Suku, Kiri, Abihi, Ike and Akutupa in Bunu district of Kabba-Bunu LGA. Others are Bagana and Bagaji villages in Omala LGA and in some other communities in Dekina LGA.

According to sources, no fewer than 2,000 herders camp in the forests, even as more and more Fulani herders are daily trooping into the forests. Several persons have been killed or maimed of late, while women and under-aged girls were raped.

On March 26, in Okete, Dekina local government area, two women, who were working on their farm, were raped, killed and set ablaze.

A community leader, Akowe Akofe, said, "We thought we would pick them up alive when the news came to the community that Wednesday. But we got to the farm and found their corpses ripped with bullets and with burns all over their bodies."

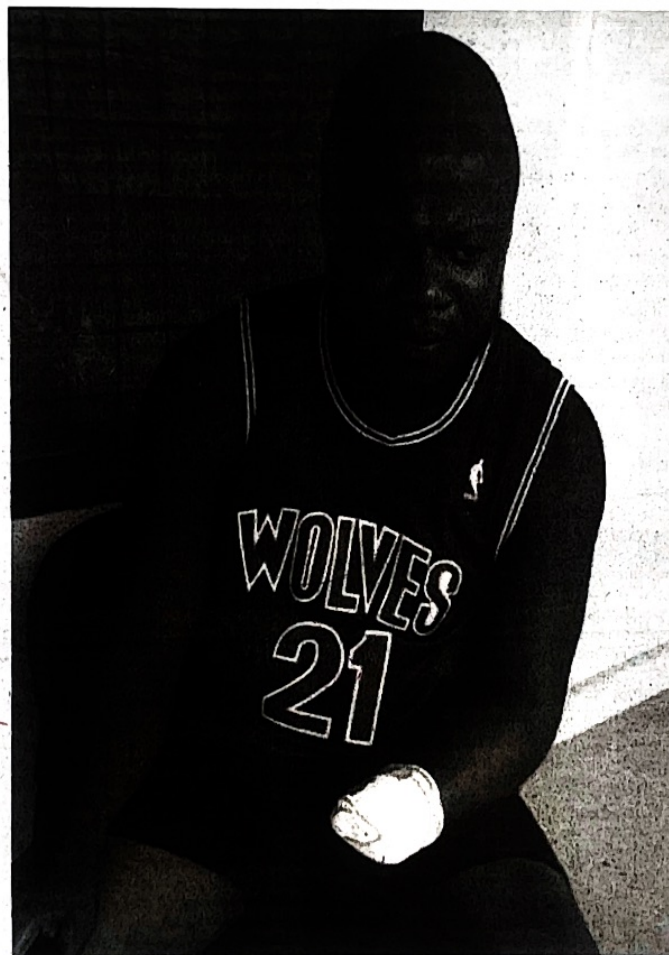
"We are yet to establish their offences for which they were to deserve this kind of mistreatment from the herders on their own farm."

Also the son of the traditional ruler of Aiyegunle Igun in Kabba Bunu LGA, identified as Ojo, was kidnapped along Kabba-Obajana Road. His abductors demanded N35 million as ransom before he was released.

The son of the traditional ruler of Oyo-Iwaa, the community hosting the Obajana Cement Plant, was not that lucky as he was killed by his abductors. Two members of the vigilante group, who attempted to rescue him were also killed.

A woman community leader, Ruth Williams, was also abducted on that occasion. Irrked by the sad episodes, youths took to the streets of Obajana, blocking entries and exits to the community.

One Daramola, who participated in the protest, said his cousin was kidnapped last month in Oyo-Iwaa: "These kidnappers are in groups, wearing security uniforms. Herdsmen are occupying our farmlands and building 'rugās', while the state gov-



Lanlege Adewale, a local traveler, had his right hand amputated by bandits

ernment is doing nothing about it."

In Aiyetoro Kiri, Kabba Bunu LGA, six people were kidnapped along with a timber contractor. Eyewitnesses said the suspects were armed with sophisticated weapons. "They targeted the only mobile phone charging shop in the town and carted away more than 50 phones."

National President, Aiyetoro-Kiri Development Association, Tolufashe Olusegun, described the abduction in the town as one too many in recent times. He lamented that the people of Bunu could no longer access their farmlands following frequent attacks by armed groups.

The same fear exists in Odo-Ape, also in Kabba Bunu LGA. The community was recently unsettled by the abduction of their councillor and eight others. The victims were abducted from their respective homes in the middle of the night.

The traditional ruler of the community, Michael Meseko, admitted that the community has been enveloped with fear after that kidnapping episode.

Not even the chairman, Kabba-Bunu LGA, Dare Michael Zacheaus, was spared by the marauders. He was abducted along Okene-Kabba Road. He narrowly escaped from his abductors when he reportedly fell in the forest. His three aides were not that lucky. Millions of naira were paid for their freedom.

These incidents have been cause for worry and protests in the state. One of such protests was staged by some aggrieved women from Oke-Ere in the Yagba West LGA, recently. They protested the killings of three persons by herdsmen and the "endless reign of terror" in their community.

The women, many of whom were elderly, marched through the town half-naked, holding sticks and leaves as they wailed over the constant attacks, kidnappings and killings around them. They urged government and the security agencies to step in and end the violent surge.

Okun Development Association (ODA), the apex socio-cultural organisation of the Okun-Yoruba people of Kogi State, expressed concern over the level of insecurity across Okun land. At the "Stakeholder Security Summit" in Kabba, headquarters of Kogi-West Senatorial District, presided over by ODA President-General, Akenssola Rotimi, they expressed grave concern over the upsurge in the cases of kidnapping and banditry and charged the authorities to do more to arrest the situation.

Olujumy of Ijumu and Chairman, Ijumu Traditional Council, Oba Williams Olusegun Ayeni, submitted that the persistent attacks by some non-indigenous criminal elements were evidently driven by an agenda to grab the land of the Okun people and possibly subjugate the people. "This must be jointly resisted," he said.

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It is widely known that for a long period of time, our people have been unable to farm for their sustenance, and to exacerbate the situation, it has deteriorated to the point where they can no longer sleep peacefully as the criminals now knock on doors to abduct individuals for ransom, while those who cannot pay face brutal execution. What have we done to deserve this?