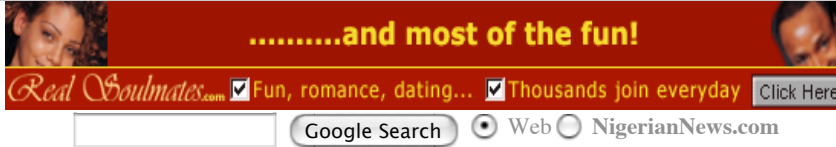


## Guest Column



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## Nigerian News

Patience Akpan-Obong

journalist and  
 assistant professor  
 of government at  
 Arizona State  
 University in the  
 United States.

The poet  
 wrote:

“Ask not  
 for whom  
 the bell  
 tolls ... for  
 it tolls for  
 you and  
 me.” Few  
 people are  
 immune  
 from this  
 madness. A  
 highly  
 placed  
 traditional  
 ruler in the  
 community  
 (whose  
 name is  
 withheld  
 for his own  
 protection)  
 showed me  
 a specially  
 made  
 bench that  
 he takes to  
 the bush  
 each night  
 to sleep. In  
 the short  
 time that I  
 was at his  
 home, his  
 eyes were  
 constantly  
 alert for  
 people  
 passing  
 outside his  
 wrought  
 iron gate.  
 He would  
 pause in the  
 middle of a  
 sentence to  
 ask his son  
 to see who  
 was at the

### This bell tolls for all of us by Patience Akpan-Obong

A chief in one of  
 the villages in [International Masters](#)  
 Abak, Akwa  
 Ibom State, was [Online master's degree from UK. Min 2 yrs work experience required.](#)  
 murdered by hired [www.LiverpoolOnlineDegrees.co.uk](#)  
 gunmen on Nov. [aggreko Contingency Power](#)  
 28, 2007. His [Specialists In Providing Emergency Power To Disaster](#)  
 name was Chief [Relief Operations](#)  
 Timothy Titus [www.aggreko.fr](#)  
 Akpan, aged 63. [UN, Non-Profits, NGO Jobs](#)  
 He was my father. [Apply Online / Send CV to 850+ Jobs Europe, US, Asia, Africa, L.America](#)  
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 not about one [Join our membership organization for firms that work on CIDA project](#)  
 man whose serene [www.developmentex.com](#)

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evening was  
 shattered by the sounds of gunshots. This is about how a gang of  
 idle miscreants and their sponsors are laying siege to a  
 community. It is about the reign of terror, hate, lawlessness and  
 wickedness that continue unabated in peace-time democratic  
 Nigeria. It is about the Darfur in our backyard.

My father's assassination is an intensely personal tragedy, but it  
 is also political. Political intervention is therefore required  
 before more lives are lost and an entire community is  
 exterminated. In the past, the police have stayed away from the  
 conflicts in the community claiming that it is political. It is  
 indeed political but it's also personal as my people have to deal  
 with the terrorism on a daily basis.

In the few days that I have been home, I have spoken and  
 listened to several people. I have cried myself hoarse but very  
 little of my tears is for my father. My heart is breaking for my  
 community – for people living in the shadow of terrorism and  
 death, and for a village that has become a ghost town. Most of  
 the people have left. Those who have no where else to go lock  
 up and leave their homes as soon as dusk sets in. Many routinely  
 sleep in the bushes.

There are stories of people beaten up randomly at the busy  
 Afaha Obong Junction – an intersection of three major roads  
 connecting Abak, Ikot Ekpene and Etim Ekpo local government  
 areas. While some of these attacks are armed robbery, others are  
 just for the sheer joy of killing without consequence or  
 conscience. There are also stories of women being gang raped in  
 broad daylight, sometimes in the middle of the road. Passersby  
 look the other way, grateful that they or their relatives are not  
 the ones screaming and writhing helplessly on the ground.

The poet wrote: “Ask not for whom the bell tolls ... for it tolls  
 for you and me.” Few people are immune from this madness. A  
 highly placed traditional ruler in the community (whose name is

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gate. One could see the terror in the man's eyes especially as the evening approached and my companions and I were still at his home. His fear is not unfounded: he has had two attempts on his life in the past two months.

withheld for his own protection) showed me a specially made bench that he takes to the bush each night to sleep. In the short time that I was at his home, his eyes were constantly alert for people passing outside his wrought iron gate. He would pause in the middle of a sentence to ask his son to see who was at the gate. One could see the terror in the man's eyes especially as the evening approached and my companions and I were still at his home. His fear is not unfounded: he has had two attempts on his life in the past two months.

The journalist in me has been asking the “Why” question. I have spoken with several people and I am confounded by the complexity of the issues. Following is a brief background to contextualize the situation.

I introduce two villages, Nna Enin, one of 24 villages in Afaha Obong clan, and Nto Otong, one of 17 villages in Midim clan both in Abak local government area of Akwa Ibom State. For more than 30 years now, the two villages have squabbled over land matters. The conflict took a violent turn in 2006, ironically over an unrelated issue. A group of young people in Nto-Otong formed a Mafia-style gang with the sole purpose of harassing, terrorizing and extorting money from people. Their victims included both locals and those passing through to other parts of the state. Afaha Obong Junction became a danger zone as people were routinely robbed, beaten and subjected to various forms of indignities.

The situation escalated when the hoodlums kidnapped and tortured a village head from one of the villages in Afaha Obong. A group from Afaha Obong retaliated by ransacking Nto Otong and burning down houses - especially those on the main road and homes of suspected sponsors of the thugs.

In the midst of the rampage that lasted several days, a contender to the village headship of Nto Otong was killed. It is not clear if he was killed by Afaha Obong or if rivals to the contested post took advantage of the confusion. The police never investigated it thus allowing speculations to run wild and settle on my village for three simple reasons: we are fewer in population, we are next door and we are Nto Otong's familiar “enemy.” Nto Otong seized on this opportunity to pursue their 32-year-old agenda of pushing my people out of their land. As head of the village, my father became the unfortunate target.

On August 25, a week before the burial of the Nto Otong elder (who incidentally was my mother's cousin), his brothers and cousins came looking for my father to kill. My people, who were getting ready to leave the house for the night, ran into the bush behind the house. Empty red bullet shells were lying around my father's compound when I was home in December 2006. A back wall is still pocked with gunshot marks.

In 2007, the local divisional police officer initiated a peace process between Afaha Obong and Nto Otong. While this was a positive development, a key element – investigating the murder of the Nto Otong elder – was overlooked. Also conspicuously absent from that peace process was a solution to the perennial conflict between Nna Enin and Nto Otong. In this respect, the peace agreement was premised on an extremely shaky foundation. There seemed to be a naive expectation that the

general peace would trickle down to the specific issues between the two villages that predated the 2006 crisis.

But my father was optimistic about the prospects of the peace deal. When I spoke with him about it on Nov. 22, he said “all is well now.” My last words to him were, “Papa, please be careful, okay? Take good care of yourself.” He told me not to worry because “My life is in God’s hands.” Six days later, he was killed as he relaxed in the evening in the living room with my mother and younger brother. Both my mother and brother were also shot (though I didn’t know about my mother’s injury until I got here).

On Nov. 28, 2007, it was my father but the bell tolls for all of us. According to the police, Akwa Ibom State has the highest homicide rate in the country. There are stories of parents killing their little children and children killing their parents on accusations of witchcraft. People have killed others during squabbles over N40. A debtor has sent hired gunmen to kill his creditor because he felt insulted for being asked to pay back the debt. The list goes on.

We have sent a petition to both the inspector general of police, Sir Mike Okiro, and Akwa Ibom Commissioner of Police, Mr. Michael Zuokumor, asking for the arrest of my father’s killers, not so much because we want justice but to ensure they do not hurt us again. Also, their arrest will deter other thugs and “area boys” from continuing to hijack the peace in the community, killing, robbing, raping and holding everyone in the grip of fear. We have also asked for a police station in our community to maintain the peace.

Beyond the judicial solution is the need for executive (political) action. Governor Godswill Akpabio is endearing himself to the people by focusing on what really matters to them – roads and rural electrification. This is commendable, but may I suggest that peace is as basic as roads and electricity. Without peace, the roads are leading to ghost towns and villages and the electricity will only provide illumination for thugs to find their way to more raping and killing and plundering. We definitely do not need the dubious award of being the state with the highest homicide rate in the country. It should not be business as usual in Uyo while the rest of the state dissolves into Darfur.

Specifically, the governor *owes* my family. If he had stepped in earlier, my father would be alive. My father’s nickname was “prince of peace.” Nothing will ever bring him back. I will be consoled however if his assassination ushers in real sustainable peace in my community. Then, the personal will truly become political.

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