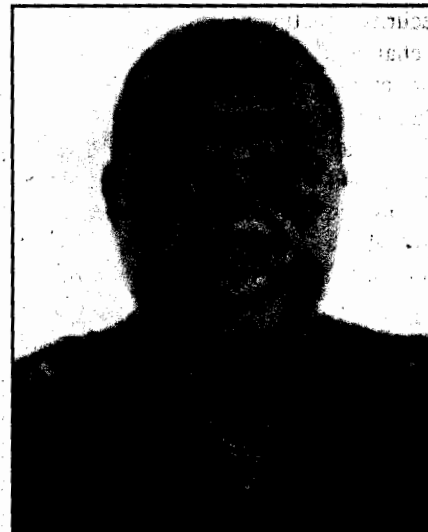


Ammunition recovered from robbers



Akaya

SECURITY IN ABA, THE commercial nerve centre of Abia State and indeed the former Eastern region of Nigeria has taken a plunge. This followed incessant attacks by dare-devil armed robbers which have left sour tales on the lips of inhabitants of Enyimba city, as the commercial town is popularly called.

Newswatch gathered that the target of the robbers has been mainly the banks, petrol filling stations, luxury buses and few individual homes. These robbers who carry sophisticated weapons operate in daylight and have made life unsafe for both people living in the city and hundreds of people who troop into the town on daily basis for business transactions.

In one robbery incident around Eziukwu market, the robbers were said to have spread out money realised from

Enyimba City Under Siege

Robbers terrorise Aba, a commercial nerve centre in the South-East, with banks as their prime targets

By Godfrey Azubike

their operation on the streets and beckoning on people to pick them. They claimed the money was part of the loots from the politicians, saved in the banks.

The robbers' style of operation was exactly reminiscent of the Lawrence Anini saga in the 80s in the old Bendel State.

As a result of this development,

all the commercial banks operating in Aba closed shop May 30, to embark on what they termed "warning strike." This further worsened the problem of the inhabitants, as the action of the banks took them by surprise. The bank managers said the strike would go full throttle if the authorities were unable to guarantee the safety of life and property of the banks and the people.

The banks, however, resumed operation on Monday June 5, while negotiations over the security matter with law enforcement agencies in the state continued. Customers equally returned to the banks but amidst fear that the robbers could still come calling. Even those walking along the streets did so with fear.

The people of Aba are noted for taking the bull by the horn when the



Suspects arrested in attempt to put tinted glasses on their Mitsubishi

security situation becomes too much of a challenge. That was what led to the formation of the *Bakassi Boys* a few years ago. The *Bakassi* vigilante group was dissolved because bad eggs infiltrated into it and the group lost focus. After wiping out robbers from Aba, *Bakassi boys* allowed themselves to be used for inglorious operations against the citizens they claimed to be protecting. People used them to settle scores and some innocent people were either tortured or killed by them. This led to the ban of the outfit.

Today, Aba people are craving for the return of the *Bakassi Boys* because they feel they are not getting enough protection from the police. This is more so when the federal government appears to have turned its back on the problem in Abia State because of the strained relationship between Orji Uzor Kalu, the state governor and President Olusegun Obasanjo. A police source told *NewsWatch* that the federal government appears not too willing to provide security in the state because of Governor Kalu's problem with the president.

As it were the fight between the two elephants has made the grasses to suffer. There are indications that the *Bakassi* outfit would be revived. Aba people demonstrated on May 30, when they lynched two suspected armed robbers trying to board a Kano-bound luxury bus belonging to G. U. O. Group of companies. They were fished out during the pre-boarding search.

Chukwu Christian, one of the managers of the transport company, told *NewsWatch* that while they were conducting search at about 5pm, two guns were found in two separate bags and the owners sensing the danger took to their heels. "Aba people pursued them and we learnt they caught them and burnt them," he said. The manager did not, however, know that danger was lurking for the company.

After the suspected robbers were lynched, their colleagues quickly regrouped, and laid ambush for the

company's buses. One of the vehicles billed for Maiduguri which took off at about 5:30pm was waylaid around Osisioma area of the metropolis. Report had it that a motorcycle and a Mercedes Benz V-boot trailed the bus and as it came out from the filling station where it had gone to refuel, the robbers pursued it and opened fire at it. Their first shot got the driver of the vehicle on the head. He was said to have continued when they overtook the vehicle, blocked it and released several bullets which killed the driver on the spot and wounded two passengers in the bus. One of the passengers who hails from Okposi in Ebonyi State whose name was given as Emeka Nwachukwu died in the hospital while the other one with light injury was treated and discharged at the General Hospital in Aba.



Suspects caught with arms

When *NewsWatch* visited the motor company, the environment was quiet with the workers wearing long faces. According to Chukwu, the manager, the slain driver whose name was given as J. B. Nwogbaru, was one of the most experienced senior drivers of the company. He had worked with the company for more than five years without problems. He said his annoyance was that when the incident happened the police refused to come to the rescue of the passengers. "Up till 9pm, we were at the scene of the incident. Even the police patrol team we flagged down refused to give the passengers any protection," he said.

The menace of the robbers did not stop there. Three days later, the robbers attacked a section of the popular Ariara International Market and a lady was killed. Consequently, market women led a protest reminiscent of the 1929 Aba women riot. They were protesting the deteriorating state of security in the town.

Charles Akaya, police commissioner for Abia State, has been having sleepless night over the security situation in Aba. The commissioner who has temporarily relocated to the city from Umuahia said he had not received any formal report from any police station over the killing of the lady. He said due to logistic reasons, his men were impaired from promptly responding to distress calls. "We do not have fast moving vehicles, in fact we have shortage of vehicles. It is not unlikely that when such distress calls come, a vehicle to be used would be out on another assignment. So, they will have to wait till such vehicles come back before they move."

The police commissioner, however, said he would investigate to find out cases of dereliction of duty against the police. "If I find out that any group couldn't go to the scene of any incident as a result of dereliction of duty, then we will punish such group," he said. Akaya also confirmed that the police was holding meetings and consultations with the banks in Aba with a view to finding lasting solution to the security problems.

He also spoke of a meeting with the bank managers. "The AIG ordered that there must be a meeting of all the bank managers in the state which was attended by 16 managers and their discussion was based on security and assistance," the commissioner said.

The banks, however, may need to do more to check the incessant robbery attacks. This is so because some of the bank robbery cases, were traced to insider collaboration. Those implicated were either the bullion van drivers or staff involved in cash movement. The source said the bankers also need to assist the police by providing them logistics to facilitate their operation against the robbers. ■