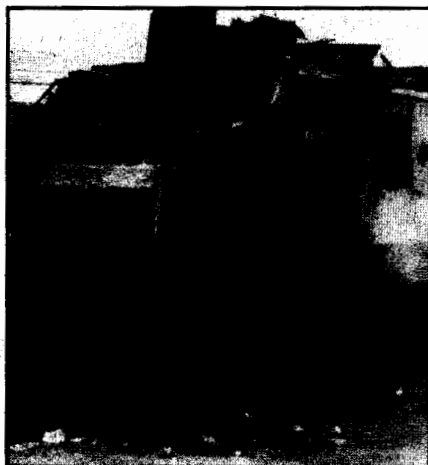




Burnt vehicles



Burnt building

Reign of Terror

Hoodlums take over Onitsha, kill, maim and cause panic in the city

By Joseph Onyekwere

BUSINESS ACTIVITIES IN Onitsha, the commercial hub of the Eastern Nigeria was last week grounded following the crisis between members of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, National Road Transport Owners, NARTO, and the Nigeria Police.

The town was last week a ghost of itself, as it became unattractive for businessmen who usually patronise its market from within and outside the state. Traders at the Onitsha market were last week bemoaning their plight because their customers had deserted the town because of the insecurity that has engulfed the city.

Newswatch learnt that some visiting female traders were robbed and raped by the hoodlums who were now on the prowl on June 17 at Upper Iweka, Onitsha.

Sylvester Odife, the president of Market Traders Association, ASMATA, told *Newswatch* that he used to make between N70,000 and N80,000 daily before the crisis erupted. He sells textile materials. At present, his daily return is less than N10,000. According to him, Onitsha on a crisis period loses more than N1.2 billion daily. The Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN

statistics states that the town is the third largest money generation town after Lagos and Abuja with an average business volume of N1.2 billion daily.

Odife said the crisis was politically motivated and blamed it on those who want to make the state ungovernable for Governor Peter Obi to create the impression that he is incapable of running the state. "They want the federal government to say that Governor Peter Obi is incapable," he said. He called for more military personnel to be deployed to the town since the neutrality of the police cannot be guaranteed.

NARTO members were allegedly at the centre of the crisis in Onitsha. The organisation is notorious for extortion, harassment, intimidation and violence. *Newswatch* gathered that it was this group that were allegedly used by Chris Uba, the self-acclaimed godfather of Anambra politics to unleash mayhem on the state in November 2004.

During the tenure of Chris Ngige, the Anambra State House of Assembly passed a resolution banning NARTO. With the coming of Obi as the new state governor, NARTO felt that MASSOB must equally be sent out of circulation with the belief that APGA has some kind

of sympathy for MASSOB. Obi contested the 2003 governorship polls on the platform of APGA.

The organisation allegedly connived with the police to track down MASSOB members. NARTO members were alleged to be committing different kinds of atrocities in the state in the name of MASSOB, just to discredit the organisation.

On June 14, men of the Nigeria police invaded MASSOB stronghold in Ogboko to dislodge them from where they were meeting. On account of that invasion, 11 members of MASSOB were shot dead.

Prince Moses Igwe, the public relations officer, PRO, of MASSOB in Onitsha gave the names of their slain members whose bodies were recovered after the attack as Kelechi Enyinwa, Johnson Chigbo, Arinze Obodozie, Iruabuchi Odinfe, Emmanuel Udokwu, Richard Uko, Chimezie Onuigbo, Onyeka Asoanya, Azubuike Gideon and Ikechukwu Iwu. The corpse of some of those listed as dead were yet to be seen.

Igwe said that they decided to embark on a peaceful demonstration to the Government House, Awka but on their way, the police intercepted them at Nkpor and shot dead two of their members.

Members later regrouped and overpowered the police armoured tank and a TATA truck at Upper Iwaka. The facilities were instantly set on fire while the policemen took to their heels. Two of the policemen were unlucky, as they were killed by the mob.

Igwe said that the military presence in Onitsha was commendable but alleged that the soldiers were ordered by the federal government to bomb Ogboko, Fegge and 33 because those are the strongholds of MASSOB.

But Ben Nwankwo, one of the leaders of NARTO told *Newswatch* that the organisation would continue to operate in Onitsha noting that nobody could ban it except the court. He warned that as long as the matter was in the Appeal Court, his group would continue to operate. He refused to either admit or deny the allegation that Uba was their sponsor.

The police seemed helpless in the face of the anarchy. In spite of police presence, violence was unabated. To further show their dislike for security institutions, police stations and prison barracks were attacked. So far, three police stations and the prisons in Onitsha have been attacked. The police stations are at 33, Peoples Club and the marine police station. At the marine police station, Geoffrey Barede, the state marine officer and an assistant superintendent of police conducted *Newswatch* round the burnt station.

He said the suspected MASSOB members attacked the station by 11pm on June 17 and removed 55 Horse Power Yamaha outboard engine and police uniforms with name tags before setting fire on the whole building. The station lost important documents and items valued at more than N20 million. Also, two policemen attacked by the assailants are receiving medical attention at an undisclosed hospital in Onitsha.

At the Onitsha Prisons Command, the orgy of violence was replicated. The assailants who paid their ungodly visit to the barracks in the early hours of June 19 set 204 inmates free. Prison documents were also set on fire while various offices were forcefully opened and vandalised.

Kalu Uche Okwara, the controller general of prisons who visited the prison

on a fact finding tour expressed sadness over what was done to the barracks. He told *Newswatch* that the prison armed squad was established to forestall such occurrence but lamented that the squad lacked the personnel to face that level of attack.

He also complained about the shortage of arms. "It is very expensive to purchase arms and ammunition. We don't have them in sufficient quantity to go round," he said. He said that only three guns were available during the attack and added that it was impossible to face the invading crowd. "So that was why we were unable to effectively control them," he said. Okwara said 10 inmates of the prison had returned on their own volition. Out of the ten, five are lunatics.

No part of the prison yard was spared in the attack. Bathrooms, furniture, stores, the gate lodge recently repaired by the Chris Ngige administration, documents, containers and many more items that run into millions of naira were burnt.

Governor Obi was visibly worried last week. At the height of the crisis, he made two broadcasts on the security situation in quick succession. In all, he called on the warring groups to sheathe their sword and embrace peace.

In the wake of the violence, the governor went to Abuja to solicit for presidential assistance. But the president had travelled. When he contacted the president on phone, he told him to brief his chief of staff in Abuja and promised to step into the crisis.

As soon as the president returned, he ordered that the army be drafted to the troubled town. The governor later announced a dusk-to-dawn curfew for one week in Onitsha. He



insisted that people whose interest was to destabilise his administration were the sponsors of the crisis.

He said that all groups like MASSOB, NARTO and Anambra Vigilance Services, AVS, involved in the crisis were banned and should not operate in the state. "Every group must leave Onitsha. And by that I mean MASSOB, AVS, NARTO, whoever. I am saying that we do not want these people again because they are our problem," he said.

He said these groups represent nothing good in Anambra State but evil. "Anybody who means well for Anambra should support that they should go, including the people behind them. These people represent nothing that is good for the people of Anambra. All they represent is evil," he said.

Later, Obi told *Newswatch* that he does not know if any individual in the state was sponsoring any of the groups. He also refused to comment on the speculations that Chris Uba was being fingered as responsible for the crisis in the state. "I don't make comments on individuals. What I know is that all groups should go," he said.

Mike Udah, chief press secretary to the governor told *Newswatch* that the crisis was politically motivated because some individuals in the state were not comfortable that there is an APGA government in Anambra State. He said Anambra State had become a hotbed of violence and added that the sponsors were working to ensure that there is permanent state of chaos and anarchy so that the federal government would possibly declare a state of emergency or the governor will be so uncomfortable that he will not even contemplate a second tenure.

Both Adewole Ajakaiye and Mike Okiro, assistant inspector-general of police and deputy inspector-general of police respectively visited the affected areas and promised to find a lasting solution to the worrisome situation.

F. Agbo, the State Police Public Relation Officer could not confirm the number of casualties and arrest made so far despite repeated visit to his office in Awka, phone calls and text messages by *Newswatch*. ■