

The Politics of Anambra Killings

Many lives have been lost in the wave of crisis that has gripped Onitsha, the commercial centre of Anambra State and sources say both money and the politics of succession are responsible

By Maureen Chigbo

OBINNA ONYIA, 24, A shoemaker since 2001, had no premonition of the evil that was lurking around him June 15. On that fateful day, he left his shop and crossed over the road to a nearby eatery. He was eating when he heard sporadic gun shots, which had become rampant in the Fegge and Okpoko areas of Onitsha in recent times. He hurriedly finished his food and ran to cross over to his shop for safety.

He was scampering when a mobile policemen with a gun accosted him from behind. Other two police men with knives ran up to where they were with knives and used the knives to hit him on the head and blood gushed out. "They hit my head twice and I fell down. They wanted to cut my neck but I used my hand to shield my neck. And they cut my hand. They said they were going to set me on fire. After they said it they left to get tyre to set me ablaze. When they left, I ran with blood all over my body," Onyia said.

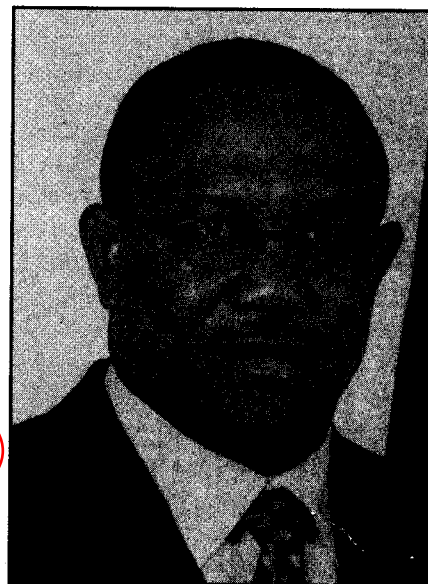
He was lucky that some good Nigerians arrived and took him first to Eric Hospital

and finally to Crown Hospital where he was hospitalised for a week and four days. "I am always dizzy. I am not able to move my fingers well due to the nerve they cut. I can't sleep well because of the pain in my hand. I can't revenge. God will avenge for me. I have not started work because my hand is not properly healed," Onyia said.

Onyia is lucky to be alive to tell his story unlike others who died. These were those who were displaced from their homes due to the crisis which engulfed Onitsha. There is the case of Chioma Uwa, a pregnant woman who was shot dead at her house at Okpoko. Ngozika Arinze fled her home in Okpoko with her five children because of the uproar. She is now staying in her brother's house. A sales lady, who wishes anonymity, said



Late Uwa



Obi



Onyia

the army and mobile police came to their residence at 6 am. "They came, pushed at the gate and everybody started crying. They dragged people out and asked them to drink gutter water. They razed stores," she said, adding that she has been taking refuge at a relations house for one week.

The persistent crisis and the increasing toll of human casualty are of great concern to both the Catholic Church in Onitsha and government of Anambra State. This is the reason the Catholic Churches in Onitsha, Anambra State, declared a nine-day novena to pray against the crisis that has crippled the commercial nerve centre of state for the past one month. The government, on its part, invited the joint police/military patrol of the affected areas in Onitsha.

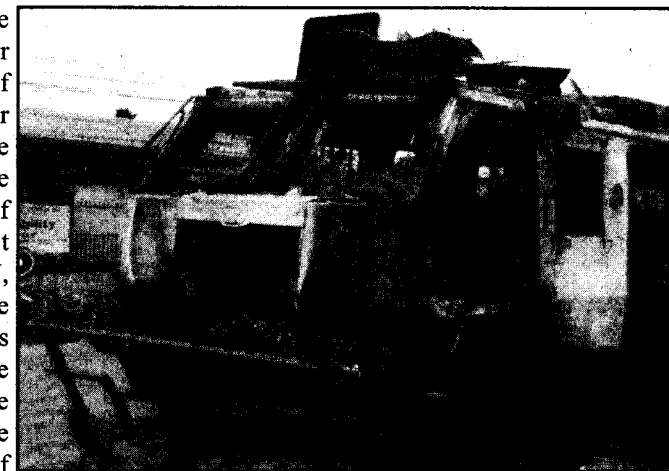
On the face of it, the crisis is masterminded by the Nigeria Association of Road Transport Owners, NARTO, and infiltrators into the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, and Anambra Vigilante Service. But beneath that façade is the struggle for money and power with all the political colourations. It is the struggle of who controls the touts or hoodlums which NARTO harbours for 2007 elections and the billions of Naira which they generate daily from the motor parks.

NARTO gained pre-eminence during the administration of ex-governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju. In a letter dated August 17, 2000, Mbadinuju terminated contracts with any union over the management of government motor parks.

following the protracted crises over the management of government motor parks and the inability of the National Union of Road Transport Workers, NURTW, Anambra State council to keep to its agreement with the Anambra State government over the management of government motor parks.

Mbadinuju recognised the National Association of Road Transport Owners, NARTO, as the only motor transport union approved to manage all government motor parks in Anambra State. The letter also stated that Anthony Ezeweputa was mandated to organise the NARTO Anambra State for the purpose of management of government parks. The letter directed all other union previously engaged in the management of government parks in the state to co-operate with Ezeweputa over such activities. It ordered law enforcement and security agencies in the state to ensure strict compliance with these government directives.

In another letter to the commissioner of police, Anambra Police Command, Police Headquarters, Awka, Hez O. Nnukwe, principal secretary to



Burnt Police Armoured Personnel carrier

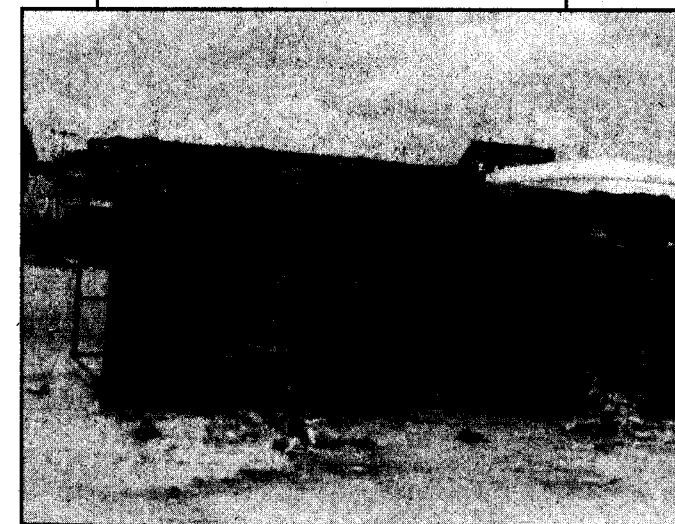
Mbadinuju, referred to the August 17, 2000, "regarding the recognition of Nigeria Association of Road Transport Owners to manage motor parks in the state and reaffirm that the recognition is to Nigeria Association of Road Transport Owners and this is consistent with the enabling laws passed by the Anambra State House of Assembly." According to the letter, "the reference to an individual, Chief Anthony Ezeweputa or any other individual to organise Nigeria Association of Road Transport Owners to this effect is hereby withdrawn as we can only deal with a registered organisation and not an individual."

Ezeweputa on Monday, 11 August, 2003, obtained an Enugu High Court order stating that he "shall manage and realise the proceeds from the management of the park i.e. to say all the motor parks in

Anambra state for a period of four years commencing from the date of the execution of this terms of settlement so as to enable him realise fully the sum of N30,000,000 which the defendants owe him."

The defendants are Nigerian Association of Road Transport Owners and one Anthony Ugbaja. The order issued by Justice A. R. Ozoemena, said that at the end of four years, the management of the park shall return to the defendants.

The order signed by A.O. Iloputa, assistant chief



Burnt Police truck

registrar, stated that not less than 50 percent of the proceeds so realised shall be ploughed into the payment of allowances of facilitators/patrons and workers of the NARTO within the period of four years.

It states that the Anambra State Police command is to assist Ezeweputa to enforce this order. Contacted on phone, Ezeweputa, who earlier promised to talk to *NewsWatch*, said that he had travel to Abakiliki and would not be able to speak.

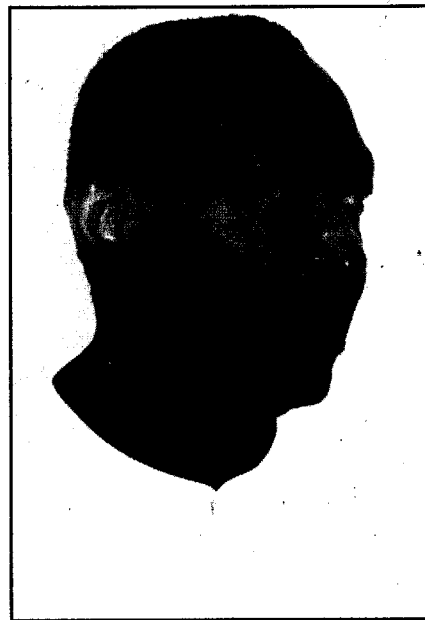
The struggle for NARTO to carve out a niche is political—all geared towards 2007 elections. "They want to create the impression that the present governor is incapable of ruling the state. They want to control the machinery of the government in 2007," Sylvester Odife, president of Anambra State Markets Amalgamated Traders Association said. According to Odife, "there are people that believe that they own the state. They are the ones causing confusion to create grounds for them to retain power in 2007. They are not happy about the federal presence Obi has attracted to the state. They want to push the governor to take action that will displease the president. The godfathers of NARTO believe that Anambra State is their private estate."

Similarly, Benson Nwosu, House Committee chairman on information, culture and re-orientation, says the crisis had political undertones. It is aimed at making it impossible for the governor to implement his programmes in a peaceful atmosphere so that at the end of his tenure his balance sheet of performance will show nothing but conflict and conflict management. And then it will not be difficult for Anambra people to say they don't want him anymore. "This will then pave way for one of the people being sponsored by these conflict engineers to come to power in 2007, create room for looting of the treasury of Anambra State and then leave the people of Anambra impoverished. In this respect it should be clearly seen that it is a class struggle for legitimacy," Nwosu said.

According to Nwosu, seeking elective post in Nigeria cost a lot of money. Seeking gubernatorial position cost huge sums of money apart from multimillion that will be spent to secure nomination,

multimillions are needed to ensure the support of INEC, stakeholder in the political system from federal to state level, also imply huge expenses. In this scenario, therefore, a gangster or gangsters who have governorship ambitions must seek ways and means of accumulating the huge sums of money required to secure political office in Nigeria. Not many people who became rich by hardwork would want to engage in this type of gamble which yields the desired office. It is, therefore, the high cost of seeking political office in Nigeria that leads some of the gangsters to engage in drug trafficking, 419, prostitution rings, human trafficking and forceful control of motor parks that yield billions of naira annually, to engage in aforementioned illegal activities. "It is therefore prudent for Mr. President and the National Assembly and all registered political parties not to make political offices available to the highest bidders, miscreants, school drop out tugs and gangsters.

Supporting Nwosu's stand, Chuks Iloegbunam, chief of staff to the Anambra State government, explained that NARTO is a political instrument and its sustenance is in control of motor parks. "It is used by patrons to fight the ends. It became so powerful that they control everything. They did it because they have armed mobile policemen supporting them," he said. Onitsha is violent because of the



Iloegbunam

money. If not because of money, how many NARTO are in other parks in Anambra. Why will a mafia seize the major source of revenue of a state. Governor Obi came with enough determination and courage to change things, he said.

According to him, NARTO was started by Mbadinuju when Emeka Offor, a business man was fighting him. Mbadinuju was not running NARTO. It was run by Chris Uba, who has denied having anything to do with NARTO. When Ngige came to power, he could not fight NARTO. He set up the Anambra Vigilante Service, AVS, to contain NARTO. On June 30, 2005, Ngige proscribed NARTO but he did not go to the parks to dislodge them. NARTO continued to collect revenues. "Governor Peter Obi's mandate is legitimate. He took his case to Abuja. Two deputy inspector general of police, DIGs, Ogbonna Onovo and Mike Okiro were asked to investigate. Also SSS filed its own report," Iloegbunam said.

The NARTO members burnt three police stations and invaded Onitsha prison. Hence the deployment of joint patrol of military and policemen to maintain security, he said.

According to Iloegbunam, the central point of their argument is that Anambra State reserves constitutional right to maintain security.

Another aspect of the problem in Anambra State is not just political but monetary. The coming of Governor Obi and the escalation of the crisis in Onitsha and its environs especially in parts of Anambra State where motor parks are located show that the conflict and contradiction transcends political party or who is in power. This is because when Ngige was governor of Anambra State, Nigerians thought the political difference between him and some stakeholder was at the centre of the conflict. "It is now clear that the teeth of the problem is the resolve of some meddlesome interlopers to divide Anambra State into fiefdoms that yield tax free money on a daily basis instead of that money accruing to the government of the day as internally generated revenue," Nwosu said. And because the money at stake is in billions

annually these small armies are prepared to kill, maim and burn down properties and making the environment look as if there is small civil wars.

He said the federal government should send soldiers and mobile policemen to chase away these hoodlums, noting that "they are not spirit, they are human beings." "They are known with names and addresses. They have family.

Accordingly, they should be arrested and made to account for the money belonging to the common-wealth of Anambra State.

They should also be tried and sentenced for a long time to serve as deterrent to others who might want to follow the same trend. They should be made to account for all the people that lost their lives—men and women and children—in the course of the conflict. They should be tried for murder," Nwosu said.

According to him, Anambra State should be seen to be a state, where the rule of law applies, not the law of the jungle. It should be seen as a state where natural justice, equity and good conscience apply like it does in the rest of the state of the federation under the Federal Republic of Nigeria. "Unless this matter is decisively dealt with now I predict that every government that will subsequently govern Anambra will be faced with same conflict relating to the control of the internally generated revenue of Anambra State."

Nwosu wants the Federal government to determine if Anambra State is part of Nigeria and if it is, then it must be clearly stated, if need be by force, that it is the state that is entitled to its internally generated revenue and not any hoodlum, tout or group of miscreants whose job is to reap where they did not sow and in the process maim and kill innocent citizens.

The above notwithstanding, there is the belief that 80 percent of the people



Razed Prison warders office, Onitsha

forming trouble in Onitsha are not from Anambra. As a matter of fact, these people were chased away from riding "Hijack" motorcycle in Enugu and MASSOB members who were also chased away from Abia and Imo. All of them came to Anambra.

While the Onitsha crisis persists, traders are lamenting the situation which has scaled down the volume of business transaction. Odife explained that it is not an exaggeration to say that business of the day in Onitsha in Anambra is almost at a standstill because their customers coming from various states and countries are no longer coming because of the crisis. "When there is normal flow of business, Onitsha used to turnover N1.5 billion daily but we are not making upto N300 million because there is the great fear by customers that they may fall victims in the hands of either the NARTO people or miscreants or hoodlums among MASSOB," Odife said that even banks were not functioning under normal condition. "If you decide to close business in Onitsha banks will also close. People are in their shed playing draft. Some of our customers have diverted to Lagos and Aba. If normalcy is achieved definitely they will come back. There is a lot of negative impression people are given whenever there is crisis. Those negative messages contribute to scaring our customers away."

Anambra people thought that with the coming of Peter Obi, the NARTO people will not create any problem. But to their surprise the reverse is the case. "We are losing about N1.2 billion. The

market graph fell to the bottom daily. We have been in this problem for the past five years. It was there during Mbadinuju's regime. There has been sporadic shooting for two weeks. So traders are losing a lot to the crisis. Our prayer is that the combined team of military and the mobile policemen will nip the problem in the bud. We are appealing to the federal government to transfer policemen in Anambra State who have stayed for four years out of the state.

A pastor who wishes anonymity told *NewsWatch* in Onitsha that the army are cultured but that Mobile Police shoot sporadically breaking louvers. "What is going on is highly organised robbery. The NARTO hoodlums forcefully abduct people to their shrine and make them swear not to reveal the demands they made on them. They enter peoples houses, especially the wealthy, forcing people to surrender their property. They make outrageous demands. NARTO people infiltrated into MASSOB," he said.

On Tuesday, July 11, the governor met with victims of the crisis at St. Micheal Catholic Church, Fegge, Onitsha for two hours. Many people who were hurt by the crisis came to physically complain to the governor. They include those who were raped, beaten or tormented by the joint military/police patrol of Onitsha. The governor said a panel comprising reverend fathers and pastors will be set up to look into their case with a view to compensating them.

Will the crisis in Onitsha ever come to an end? Iloegbunam provided an answer. In another two weeks the crisis will fizzle out, "We have passed the most difficult era. Anambra government is fighting hardened criminals who kidnap, rape women to create the impression that the situation is worse. People who instigate these things manage to be faceless. I have no doubt that intelligence community are briefing the state government and the federal government," Iloegbunam said, adding that the President deployed the army. "I don't know how soon the army will go back to the barracks. But while they are here we hope they will not do things that are unmilitary and ungentlemanly. ■