

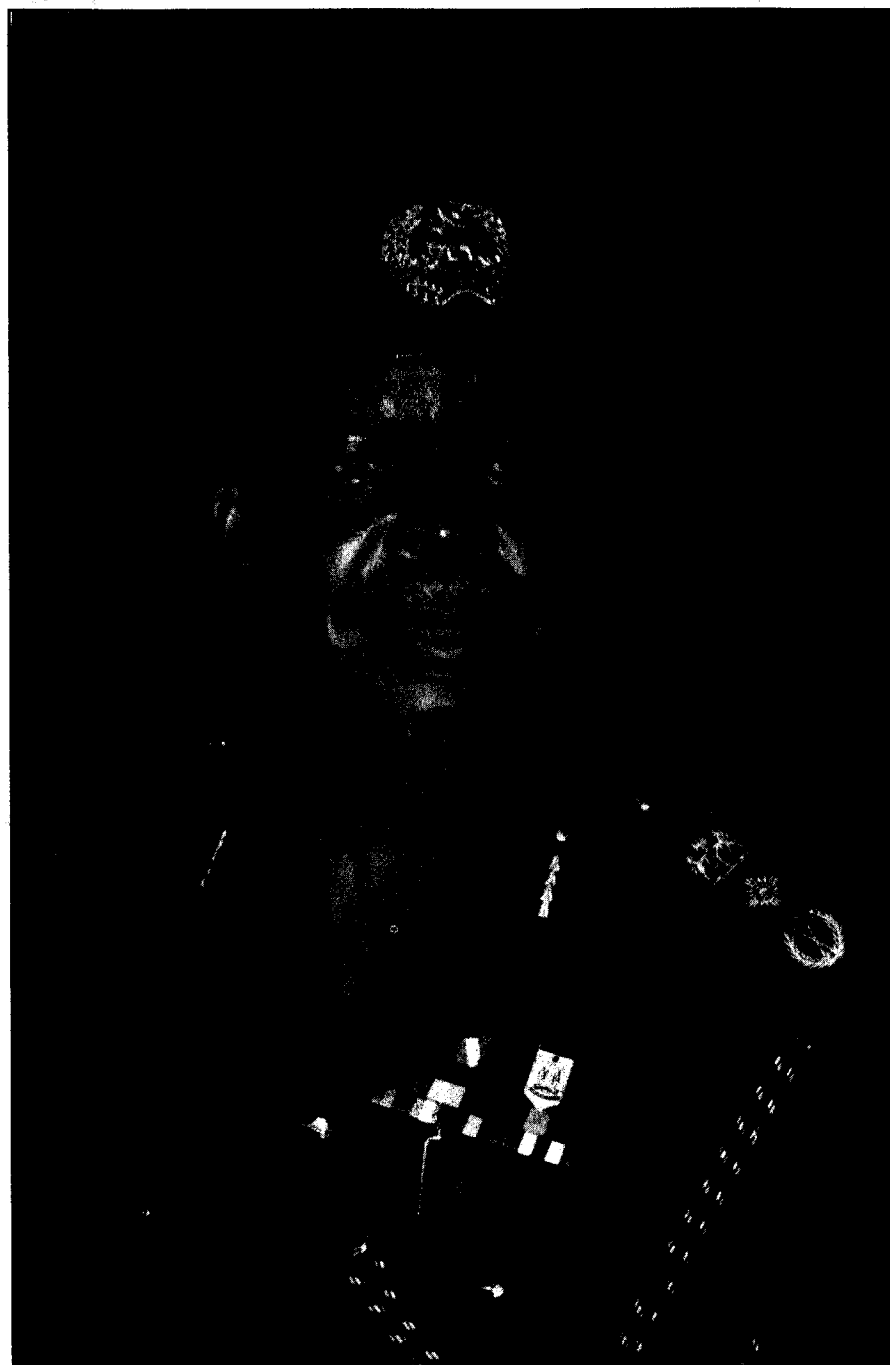
# Gunmen on the Rampage

They are young and daring. Shooting to kill is their mission

By Maureen Chigbo

**M**IKE OKIRO, THE inspector-general of police, must be worried about the unrelenting attacks on people by gunmen in the country. In the last five months, gunmen have terrorised many inhabitants in different parts of the country. From arm robbery operations in major markets to sporadic shootings in the streets, gunmen have graduated into kidnapping and hostage taking of adults and children. There has been the kidnap of Michael Stewart, a three-year old boy, and son of Linda Somiari Stewart, a member of the Rivers State House of Assembly, representing Okrika Constituency. The little boy who was kidnapped at the Tantua International School, Elelenwo, a suburb of Port Harcourt, was released several days later, after reasonable ransom was paid.

The latest in the gunmen kidnap affair is that of Margaret Hill, a three-year old Briton. It was a harrowing four



Okiro: Worried about the attacks by gunmen



Magaret Hill: Kidnapped by gunmen



Rampaging hostage-takers in the Niger Delta

days for Mike Hill, a Briton and his wife Oluchi, a Nigerian, as they anxiously waited for the release of their daughter. She was snatched from the car that was taking her to school on Thursday, July 5, while in a traffic jam in Port Harcourt. Margaret was released by her captors last Sunday. Her parents said they would take her to the hospital for a medical check up. Hill, an oil worker, said the medical check up was to treat her for mosquito bites because, according to him, her abductors kept her in mosquito infested environment. "We will take her to the hospital for a comprehensive check-up," he said.

The mother of the girl was full of thanks to God for saving the life of her daughter from the claws of the kidnappers. She urged government authorities to guard against such inhuman act in future.

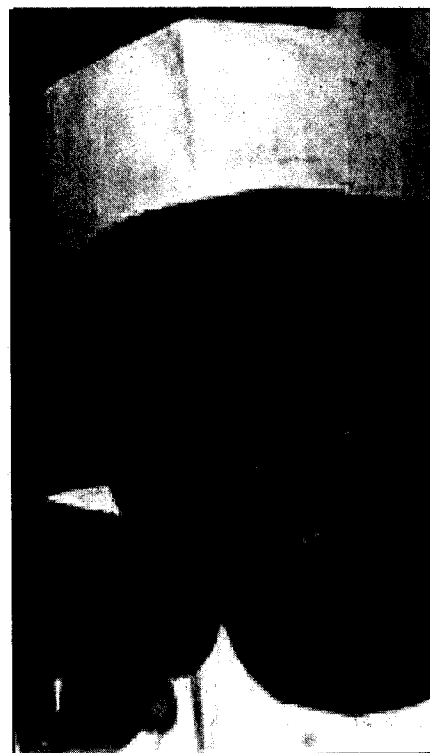
Margaret's abduction rattled Nigeria to the extent that President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua directed that everything possible must be done to ensure her speedy release. Yar'Adua also wrote the parents of Margaret condemning the act. In the letter, the president hoped that the harsh ordeal will leave no lasting scar on the psyche of the brave little girl. He assured that his administration remained committed to engendering a lasting peace and security in the Niger Delta region. The letter was delivered to the Hill by Olusegun Adeniyi, the spokesman of the president, July 10.

At the height of the Margaret kidnap last week the inspector-general of police was in Port-Harcourt, and he directed that all machinery must be put in place to ensure the release of the little Briton. Two days later after Okiro's visit, the girl was released. *Newswatch* gathered that her release followed the payment of undisclosed huge ransom.

There was the kidnap of Cecilia Omehia, mother of Celestine Omehia, governor of Rivers State by gunmen in May. The development also caught the police napping over security lapses that gave way to the suspected kidnappers. Cecilia was later released.

It is not only the kidnap of innocent persons that is raising concern among the populace. The spate of killings of innocent people in the streets of Port

Harcourt, by gunmen is worrisome. The activities of gunmen have also crippled nightlife in the once bubbling garden city. On July 1, more than 18 persons were killed in various parts of Diobu area of the state capital by unknown gunmen. In the latest spate of killings, attacks, four persons were gunned down along Emenike Street, two of them were women. One of the women, a young girl in her early 20s was walking with another girl, when the stray bullet hit her and she died



Yar'Adua, Adeniyi: Condemned the attacks by gunmen

on the spot. Her friend was said to have received minor injury, and she fled with it.

In Okija Street, also in Diobu, a woman was shot dead right behind the steering of her car. She was driving a Peugeot 504 Salon car with registration number, Rivers AV 270 PHC. She was stuck in the pool of her own blood till the following morning, when the police came and removed her remains. There were also two other male corpses lying in Okija Street as a result of the attack of gunmen that same day.

At the near-by Gambia Street, which is mainly a Hausa settlement, four other persons including a woman lost their

lives to the attack of the hoodlum. The woman whose name was given simply as Rose and one man died instantly, while the two others were said to have died later at an undisclosed clinic.

On Abakiliki Street by Ojike Street, the gunmen also shot and killed four men. They also killed two men including an elderly man in Njemanze Street. The attacks by the gunmen left several other persons wounded. The gunmen said to have taken off from one of the water



fronts, riding in unmarked Mercedes Benz car and a bus, moved to Elechi Beach area of Diobu, before heading to Mile One area.

In Rumuolumeni, a suburb of Port-Harcourt, four persons were killed by unknown raiders the same Sunday. A few days earlier, one Gideon Isi, a youth leader of the area was killed by unknown persons, a situation that threw the area into crisis. In the crisis that followed the killing of Isi, more than 20 people were killed in the area. The development led to the fleeing of residents of the area, especially strangers. It was not until Celestine Omehia, the state governor, and the police in the state intervened that calm returned to the area. The latest killing in the area was said to be retaliatory on

those suspected to be in support of the assassination of the youth leader.

In Ogoniland, the traditional ruler of Kor village in Bori, Khana LGA of the state, whose name was given as Chief Gue was beheaded by unknown gunmen on July 1, this year. The traditional ruler was said to have been murdered for taking side with one of the cult groups operating in the area. The police in the state are also investigating the murder.

throughout the attack penultimate Sunday, the police did not surface, until much later when the gunmen were through with their operation. The police appear to have no solution to the incessant menace of the hoodlums in the state.

Udengs Eradiri, an engineer, and secretary-general, Ijaw Youth Council, IYC, condemned the attack by the gunmen in the Diobu area of Port-Harcourt, stating that it was carried out by a cultist group.



Saror: Victim of gunmen's reign of terror

Iheanyichukwu Amaechi is one of the survivors of this latest shooting. He explained that he had gone out to see off somebody that visited him when the bandits trapped him. According to him, on his way back, the gunmen pulled a bus by his side and commanded him and some other five persons to lie face down. As they obeyed, the hoodlums opened fire on them and later drove off after they felt that they had all been killed. How the bullet missed Amaechi, and killed the rest of the people with him has remained a mystery to the young man.

Residents of Port Harcourt are not happy with the attitude of the police towards protecting them in times of such attack. *Newswatch* gathered that

Apart from the gory tales in Port Harcourt, on April 15, four gunmen who later identified themselves as policemen attacked and opened fire on the Makurdi residence of Daniel Saror, a professor and ANPP gubernatorial candidate in the 2007 polls in Benue State. The ANPP flag bearer at the time of the incident had just returned from Zaki-Biam, his village and was in his residence waiting for the result of the election to be announced. The gunmen shot at close range felling Samuel Aayongo, a house help in the residence in the process.

The men were, however, overpowered and arrested by security men on guard at Saror's residence at the time of the incident. As at the time of this

report, the Benue State Police Command was yet to come out with facts about the investigations into how four of their men allegedly attacked the Makurdi residence of the ANPP stalwart. Toki Olumi, police public relations officer, PPRO, Zone 4 police zonal command with headquarters in Makurdi confirmed the incident. He said the four policemen involved in the incident were arrested and would be investigated.

But almost two months after the incident, nothing has been heard of the investigation. Saror thinks there is a deliberate attempt by the Benue State Police Command to cover up the incident.

Emmanuel Deebo, PPRO, Benue State Police Command, said that is not the case. In a recent interview with journalists in the state he was quoted saying that the "investigation is not something we can make public. It is for public consumption. The matter was taken care of departmentally by the police."

In Abuja on Thursday, June 14, Major General Joseph Aondo, rtd. was abducted and killed by yet to be identified gunmen in the Gwarimpa area of the federal capital territory, FCT. Aondo was a member of the 10 regular course of the NDA had served variously in the army and was the chief of logistics, COLOG, the Defence headquarters in Abuja from where he retired just last year.

It was learnt that the general was in company of his wife at the time of the incident. The couple, *Newswatch* learnt, had driven out together to inspect some property of theirs on the ill-fated day. They had hardly stopped the car when some armed men ordered the couple out of the car. They ordered the wife of the general to lie with her face down, while they took Aondo away in the car.

About an hour after he was driven away, a search party put together by security operatives found the general's body in the very car the gunmen had snatched from the couple inside a bush in the same Gwarimpa area of the FCT. The search party found the general dead with several bullet holes around his chest. The relation of the slain general to *Newswatch* that the perpetrators of the murder might have come specifically

eliminate the general. This, he said, was because the assassins did not take anything away from his car including his mobile phones and other valuables.

The story of gunmen attack at the home of Senator Rashidi Ladoja, immediate past governor of Oyo State, is another cause for concern. About three persons were killed while others suffered injuries during the attack which was repelled by security operatives attached to the former governor in conjunction with the various private security guards employed by residents of the area. The gunmen arrived at the former governor's residence around 1.25 a.m., shooting sporadically into the air. One of the residents of the area, who spoke under the condition of anonymity, told *Newswatch* that the hoodlums announced to the neighbourhood that they were not armed robbers and that they had only come to burn down Ladoja's residence and destroy whatever was within the house.

Last week, the Oyo State police command also paraded two armed bandits who attacked some motorists along Idi-Ayunre road of Ibadan on July 3. During the attack, the bandits killed a medical doctor and driver of a commuter bus. A police sergeant was also killed while a

police constable sustained serious gunshot injury.

These cases are testimonies to the fact that lives and properties are not safe in the Oyo State due to the activities of gunmen. Yusuf Arogundade, an indigene of Ibadan told *Newswatch* that the activities of gunmen in the state were alarming. "They terrorise people. They loot and maim. They have become a menace to the people of Ibadan," Arogundade said.

Bisi Olagunju, a veterinary doctor in Ibadan, confirmed Arogundade's story. He said he had to hide his head few weeks ago when thugs and hoodlums attacked innocent people in the Molete area of Ibadan. "They collected handsets and money from people and matcheted those who didn't co-operate with them. Thugs and hoodlums have taken over Ibadan," Olagunju said.

A police officer who spoke to *Newswatch* under condition of anonymity, said though there hasn't been too many cases of armed robbery in Oyo State, the activities of thugs and hoodlums have been on the rise. He said the thugs and hoodlums were used by some politicians during the last election. "These politicians made arms and ammunitions available to these boys because they

believed the election was a do or die affair. Now the election is over and the boys are now unleashing terror on innocent people," the police officer said.

Udom Ekpoudom, the new commissioner of police in Oyo State, in Ibadan, last week, said it was disheartening that the state, which hitherto was known to be peaceful, is now being given a bad name due to the activities of area boys and thugs. "Let me send this warning signal that political thugs and their sponsors, no matter how highly placed, shall no longer be tolerated in Oyo State. I will like to stress that Oyo State will henceforth be too hot for political thugs, miscreants and their sponsors since the law is no respecter of persons," he said.

Ekpoudom said he was aware that there was a proliferation of arms and ammunition in the state but assumed that the police was already at work to mop up the illegal arms and ammunition.

The new commissioner said his GSM lines would be made available 24 hours and divisional police officers and area commanders would henceforth own two GSM lines each for easy treatment of distress calls. He urged indigenes of the state not to lose faith in the police but to join hands with them to arrest criminality by feeding them with useful tips and information.

In Lagos, last June, gunmen rained terror on occupants of the popular Computer Village market in Ikeja, leaving two persons dead while about 30 persons were injured. Also in May, some gunmen attacked the Shogunle area of Oshodi, Lagos, leading to the loss of two innocent lives. Buoyed by their success that night, the robbers returned to the same Oshodi for another operation. That was when luck ran out on them.

Unknown to them, the Lagos State Police Command had deployed more officers to the area. This time, two of the robbers lost their lives while six of them were arrested in the ensuing shootout between them and the police.

*Newswatch* learnt that the robbers had written a letter to some residents of the area informing them of their impending visit. A motor cyclist who operates within Oshodi confirmed that

Oshodi had witnessed series of crimes in the past months. "As a cyclist, there are some areas like the Oshodi expressway junction that I now avoid once it is about 10-11p.m."

Another resident who lives in Shogunle, Oshodi, who wishes anonymity, told *Newswatch* that fear had gripped many residents, as a result of news of robbery incidents in the area. This has resulted in the erection of security gates in many parts of Shogunle. *Newswatch* visited the area on July 9, and saw that many neighbourhoods now have gates newly installed.

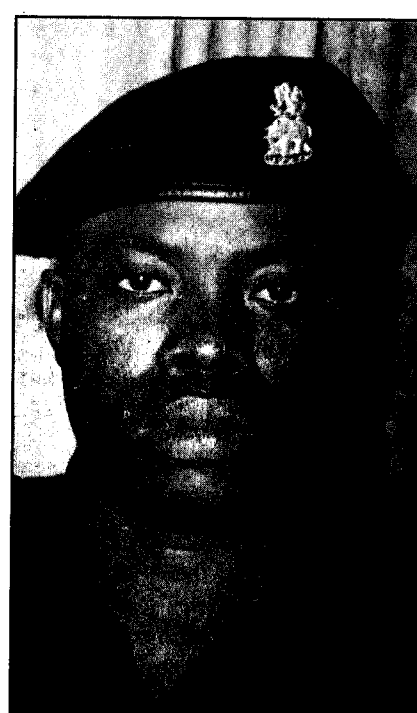
Also, on July 10, armed hoodlums reportedly laid siege within the Maryland Bridge of the Ikorodu expressway and robbed some people of their valuables. Such robbery incidents have become a source of concern to many Lagos residents, as no one knows where and when the robbers might strike next.

Prior to this, gunmen had killed Clementina Sadauwa, a manager with Ericson Company in Nigeria in February. The woman was killed by a gang of five robbers who robbed her in her car at Apogbon bridge on Lagos Island at about 8 p.m. Sadauwa was with her little baby at the back of the car when the incident happened. The robbers were apprehended in June.

Olubode Ojajuni, the Lagos State Police public relations officer, said the Police was alive to its duty of safeguarding lives and property. He said that the new inspector-general of police has marshalled out a new programme, chief of which is to tackle crime and corruption. "Of course, you know that we also have a new commissioner in Lagos, M. D. Abubakar, and under him, Lagos police command has recorded successes here and there." Ojajuni believes that the performance of the Lagos Police command has been commendable in the last two months. This is not unconnected to what he considers an improvement in the operational gadgets now in use by the command. "These days, there's hardly any week we don't parade up to 27 robbers. Also, within two days we have recovered eight ammunitions in Apapa. We have improved on our performance. When you



Ekpoudom; Ojajuni: Promise hell for gunmen



have better crime fighting tools, you will be courageous," he said.

Even then, the police spokesman believes that crime is not on the rise in Lagos. "Certainly, the Police are on top of the situation. However, there's no way one could deny that crime doesn't exist. It's something you hear of in every society. What is important is to ensure that the crime rate is low," he said.

The spate of violent robbery incidents also ripped through some northern states of the federation in recent times. The most recent of these incidents was recorded in Zaria, a city famous as a major citadel of learning Saturday, July 7. At about 8.30pm that evening, a gang of five armed young men drove into the premises of *Mr. Biggs*, a popular fast food joint in the town in a green coloured jeep. They dropped from the vehicle shooting sporadically into the air. While two of them remained outside, the other three stormed into the eatery where some customers were quietly having dinner. Still shooting randomly, the three proceeded to rob the customers of valuables including handsets, jewellery and money. In the process, one Kayode, a doctor and lecturer with ABU, was shot in the head. The lecturer in the Building Department died instantly. They also shot

an unidentified young lady before storming out of the building and zooming off in their vehicle. They were said to have later robbed another victim of his vehicle at gun-point before making off with their loot. There was no trace of them as at the time of going to press, even as police authorities say the incident was being investigated.

Shortly before the Zaria incident and precisely on the July 1, residents of Kaduna metropolis were stunned when news rapidly spread through the town about a daring operation by armed robbers in the state capital's central market in broad daylight. According to eyewitnesses, the gang had obviously surveyed their quarry for a long time. That particular day, two persons believed to be accomplices of the armed robbers had entered the shop of one Umaru Dikko Bauni, a dealer in gold and other expensive jewellery, located at Block 193 shop 2/3 at about 2pm, ostensibly to purchase some jewellery. While they were surveying the goods on display in the shop, one of them, a lady, was said to have made a call, during which she was overheard to have said, "*Alhaji yana aciki*," meaning "Alhaji is inside" (the shop). Within five minutes of the call, four young boys arrived the shop



Ladoja: Visited by bandits

brandishing automatic hand-guns. They proceeded to rob the shop of jewellery estimated at about N5 million before melting into the crowd in the ever-busy market. *NewsWatch* gathered that the two "scouts" were arrested by the police but police authorities did not confirm this.

Even as far back as February 13, Kaduna has been under siege by daredevil armed robbers. In broad daylight of that day, men of the underworld stormed a bureaux de change in a bank located close to the famous Hamdala Hotel in the heart of Kaduna town. The 10 robbers arrived in two Honda cars and proceeded to shoot into the air, scaring away crowds of people who usually gather around the area for business. Even the six-man police detail on duty in the area took to their heels at the sight of the gunmen, throwing away their weapons and tear gas canisters so as not to give away their identity as policemen.

The gunmen then proceeded to meticulously raid the various bureaux de change, shooting seven persons in the process. The operation lasted for an incredible 20 minutes, during which no security operative ventured near the area of operation. About N20 million was said to have been lost to the robbers.

In Katsina State, a three-man gang robbed an electronics shop in the state capital, making away with N205,280. The gang, however, ran out of luck when vigilant policemen on June 11, arrested two members of the gang. To the shock of those present, the two arrested armed robbers were actually soldiers from the 35 Motorised Division located in the town. The fact came to light when a military identity card was discovered on one of them, who immediately confessed that the two of them were soldiers.

Danazumi Doma, the state's commissioner of police disclosed that the two soldiers have already been dismissed and were facing prosecution while efforts were on to apprehend the third suspect. Doma further disclosed that 10 robbery suspects were arrested within the state in the month of June alone, saying that lots of ammunition and dangerous weapons were also recovered from them.

Ironically, soldiers were victims of violent attacks in Kano barely one month after the Katsina incident. Two soldiers from 3rd Brigade, Bukavu in Kano were on duty when they were attacked at Falgore, a forest reserve located in Doguna Local Government. The two unsuspecting soldiers were said to have gone to purchase food when they were ambushed by gunmen and shot down in cold blood.

Angry colleagues of the slain soldiers quickly rallied and were about to launch an all out reprisal attack on the settlement and its environs. An ugly incident was however, prevented when the state government learnt of the development and quickly moved to stop the raid. The incident was confirmed by Adegoke, a lieutenant and spokesman of the brigade.

The development was a sad reminder of the violence that erupted in Panshekara, in Kano last April when armed militants, believed to be religious extremists, laid siege on the area, and in a spate of two weeks, killed more than 40 military personnel. The siege was only ended when soldiers of the same 3rd Armoured Brigade laid a prolonged siege on the fundamentalists, during which 23 of them were killed.

Prior to the climax of this tragic episode, several seemingly unconnected violent incidences had occurred across the length and breadth of Kano State. In

one such incident, unknown persons attacked the office of the FRSC, killing four of the officers instantly. In another incident, suspected armed robbers raided a bureaux de change in the state capital, carting away more than N20 million. Another incident occurred on April 12 when an armed gang again attacked the Sharada police station, killing two policemen after a prolonged shoot out.



Obi: Plans to purchase armoured vehicles

The next day, gunmen unbelievably stormed a crowded mosque in the centre of town and shot dead an Islamic scholar renowned for his fiery preaching. They also shot two other persons who had tried to block their escape route.

In Kano State, Auwalu Jubril, the sole administrator of Minijibir Local government council, was murdered in June by gunmen at his private home in Minijibir. The Kano State Police Command confirmed the incident and offered huge amount as reward to anybody who could

provide useful information that could lead to the arrest of the armed men.

In Taraba, the State Police command paraded five robbers as members of the gang that has been terrorising the public in Wukari and Takun areas, southern part of Taraba State. Richard Chime, the commissioner of police in the state, said the group was also responsible for the killing of three policemen that were on patrol in the area on May 24.

Oliver Osuchukwu, the new police commissioner in Anambra State received a baptism of fire from robbers in Anambra State, on June 30, one week after he resumed office. Robbers operated for about two hours in Umuriam Community in Njikoka LGA, where the commissioner



Balonwu: Robbery victim

officially resides, on the outskirts of Awka, the state capital.

Clement Ozor, an indigene of Umuriam who witnessed what happened told *NewsWatch* in Awka that the robbers came with sophisticated weapons and were shooting as if they were attacking enemies in a war front. "The entire villagers ran into the bush and I instantly developed diarrhea on account of fear that arose from the gun shots. I have

never had that kind of experience before," Ozor told *NewsWatch*.

He revealed that the robbers attacked a hotel in the area called Jollyland and another called Koka International Hotel. Many people who lodged in the hotel were said to have been also robbed of their money and valuable properties.

A prominent indigene of the Umuriam community called Dan Nwobi was said to have been attacked also, and the robbers took away his Mercedes Benz car.

Four days before the June 30 attack on Umuriam autonomous community, robbers were said to have also operated in the area, within the hours of 1am-3am. Their main victim, this time, was a petrol station called COBEX. "When they came, they destroyed all iron protectors in the house as if they were destroying broom sticks. They entered, destroyed the safe storing money. There was no resistance from any quarters throughout the two hours they operated in the community," Ozor told *NewsWatch*.

A major Coca-Cola dealer in Awka was also a victim of robbery attack last month, while the nationwide strike called by labour was in full swing. *NewsWatch* learnt that it was a daylight robbery incident and the dealer lost about N4 million in the process. Robbers were also said to have struck again on the spot last week, and took away, an undisclosed amount of money from the Coca-Cola dealer.

Michael Balonwu, immediate past speaker of Anambra State House of Assembly was also a victim of robbery attack two weeks ago. Balonwu lost his 406 Peugeot Saloon car to robbers who snatched it from a relations of the former speaker who was driving the car somewhere behind Government House in Awka.

The worrisome situation of security in the state has indeed attracted the attention of Peter Obi, the state governor. Obi told *NewsWatch* in Awka last week, that his government was paying special attention to the need for security of lives and property in the state. He explained that since "the essence of governance is the welfare of the people, the issue of security must be given a priority of place

in governance because it is only when a person is alive that he can benefit from whatever programme the government is putting in place."

*NewsWatch* learnt that Obi is planning to purchase five armoured vehicles to check the increasing wave of robbery in the state. The governor, however, refused to give details of the vehicle purchases to be made, during his interview with *NewsWatch*.

In Akure unidentified gunmen reportedly invaded the residence of Dele Olatunji, the Labour Party candidate for Irele/Okitipupa federal constituency in Ondo State, at Ore in Odigbo area of the state in June.

The rise in the activities of gunmen is attributed to the arming of thugs by politicians to intimidate their opponents in the past April elections. The thugs have not been disarmed and the bad ones use the arms to now terrorise Nigerians. There is also the issue of growing unemployment amongst youths which make them to fall prey of politicians who turn them into armed thugs for their campaigns.

It is in view of curtailing the activities of the gunmen that the federal government, last week, constituted a peace and conflict resolution committee aimed at advancing solution to stem the tide of restiveness in the country and the Niger Delta, in particular. Goodluck Jonathan, the vice-president inaugurated the committee in Port-Harcourt, July 2.

But the IYC scribe said membership of the committee did not reflect the will of the organisation. He alleged that some of the people in the committee are questionable characters. "They are people who have been involved at various levels sponsoring hostage taking, yet, these persons are those used as members of the committee. The committee is evil. It is a committee that will continue to perpetuate hostage taking in the region, and encourage violence in order to have something doing," Eradiri told *NewsWatch*.

Peace committee or not, the challenge before the inspector-general of police is to stop the activities of gunmen and make Nigeria a peaceful place for all.

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