



•Some of the houses burnt.

Border town tragedy

Three die, houses burnt over loss of mobile phone

Peace walked out of Seme on January 2, 2008 and violence took over the sleepy border town, near Benin Republic. No fewer than three lives were lost while properties worth millions of naira were destroyed. Amazingly, the cause of the tragic incident was a mobile phone.

Although it is more than two weeks since violence broke out over the missing handset, the once serene community remains a shadow of its former self as police continue the search for the brains behind the loss of lives and the wanton destruction of properties.

When *Saturday Punch* visited the community on Tuesday, one of its leaders, Chief Macavo Sorpka, had just returned from the State Criminal Investigation Department, Pantti, Lagos with some members of the community, including Bilikisu, the owner of the notorious mobile phone. "We were allowed to return home after we were interrogated. Imagine the loss of an ordinary handset resulting in such mayhem. I believe it was the handiwork of the devil," Sorpka said in a voice laden with regrets.

But the Igbo residents of the town believed they were worst affected by the violence and, as at Monday, were still spoiling for a showdown. The Igbo leader in the community, Chief David Nnakwe, said, "We have already reported to the Ndigbo branch in Badagry that we are not safe here, and our leaders have promised to come to our aid. We are likely to go to court over the matter." He said this as an emergency meeting with his kinsmen progressed in his palace.

The crisis began at the apartment of a middle-aged woman who simply identified

Ayodele Ale

herself as Ezenwanyi. Her younger sister had fell into labour around 4pm on December 17, and because the husband of the woman was not around, it fell to her to take her sister to the hospital in company with a man called Emmanuel.

At the delivery room, complications set in and the doctor reportedly demanded for N7,000 as advance payment. "Since I did not have that much on me; I had to rush back home to look for the money," she recalled.

By the time she returned to the hospital with the money, an argument was going on over a missing handset that Bilikisu, a secondary school leaver, had brought to the reception room of the hospital to charge.

"I met two of my people already stripped naked," Ezenwanyi recalled. "And when they could not find any handset on them, they asked me to produce Emmanuel who had left the hospital because he was told that he could not go beyond the reception. They said he was the one that stole the handset."

When Ezenwanyi told them she did not know what they were talking about, Bilikisu headed for Emmanuel's house in company with her brother, Aliu Yusuff. Emmanuel had left home before they arrived, but they met two other young men whom they asked about Emmanuel.

In the process, an argument ensued between the two parties and degenerated into fisticuffs, during which Aliu was said to have been hit in the head with a plank. He collapsed and started writhing in agony. He was consequently rushed to Makavo Clinic where he was said to have been

treated. But he eventually died because, the man in charge of the clinic said he rejected an anti-tetanus injection. "When we wanted to give him an anti-tetanus injection, he rejected it, saying that he disliked injections. I told him that he should take it, but he said the wound would heal and that we should not worry," Macavo, who doubles as a community leader and manager of the clinic, said.

Some residents said Aliu was already looking hale and hearty and had been going about his duties for about two weeks before he suddenly fell ill. "They came and told me that Aliu was sick. When I got there, he could not talk. I told him it was the consequence of not submitting himself for proper treatment. I quickly directed that the family should take him to a general hospital because his condition had gone bad," Macavo recalled.

Aliu gave up the ghost at the General Hospital in Badagry on January 2, 2008 when most Nigerians were savouring the joy of a new year. Sadly, he was said to be the only child of his mother who became a widow three years ago.

Before his corpse got to the family compound at Seme, the news of Aliu's death had reached his friends, who allegedly went on the rampage, attacking Emmanuel and Ezenwanyi's relations and setting their homes ablaze. One of the victims, Emmanuel Nnakwe, alleged that the mob broke into his beer parlour, drank all the beer and broke the bottles before setting the shop ablaze.

Chief Nnakwe also said he was thoroughly beaten. He said, "The militants broke into my palace and started beating

me. But for the timely intervention of the police, they would have killed me. I have been sick since then."

Men of the Nigeria Police Force had to be sent in from the Seme Area Command to prevent the mayhem from spreading.

Although Aliu's family initially rejected his corpse and insisted they wanted him alive, they were eventually persuaded to accept their fate. Jude, who allegedly hit Aliu with a plank, was said to have bolted, prompting the police to arrest his younger brother.

Unfortunately, as friends and relations were mourning Aliu, the woman Ezenwanyi brought to the hospital for delivery and her baby also died. Their remains were said to have been taken to their village in Anambra State for burial on December 20.

Ezenwanyi believed that the handset crisis denied her sister and her baby the necessary medical attention. "Instead of attending to my sister, they faced the handset issue and she was losing blood," she said. It was double tragedy for Ezenwanyi as her 23-year-old son had died a few days earlier.

When contacted, the Divisional Police Officer in charge of Seme Area Command, Mr Banji Ogunrinde, said he would not want to comment on the matter. He said that all the evidence, including written statements and photographs, had been forwarded to the state command.

Efforts to obtain the comment of the spokesman of the Lagos State Command of the Nigeria Police Force, Mr Frank Mba, were unsuccessful as he was said to have travelled out of the country.