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Soldiers, policemen invade Abia community, burn down 400 houses, including that of a blind old man

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For the people of Abala kingdom in Obingwa Local Government Area of Abia State, January 20 and 21 are days they would not forget in their lifetime. These were the days on which rampaging soldiers and policemen invaded the 10 villages that make up the kingdom. At the end of what could be described as a form of apocalypse, hundreds of houses were destroyed and more than 20,000 persons were rendered homeless.



File
A burnt house belonging to a building materials trader in Ariara Market, Aba

Trained and armed to kill and to destroy, the security operatives marched from house to house in a vindictive campaign of attrition. All the paraphernalia of warfare were deployed in the operation in which children, men, women and the aged were chased into the bush before their houses were set ablaze.

It was not a case of selective vendetta. The rich, the powerful, the poor and even the infirm got a share of the inexplicable cruelty.

While residents of the distraught villages have different versions of what led to the crisis, a common strand runs through their accounts. They all pointed accusing fingers at the Joint Task Force and policemen from the Abia State command. All the residents who spoke said the events that led to the tearing apart of the community started on Tuesday, January 20. It was in the evening.

Chidima Okorie, a 23-year-old resident of Azuahia village, said she was in the farm when a big bus filled with men drove pass the dusty community road at neck breaking speed. Not long after, she said three police patrol vehicles and three other patrol vehicles belonging to Abia State Vigilante Services also known as "Bakassi Boys," raced into the community.

She said, "When they (police and Bakassi Boys) came to our market square, they stopped and stole petrol from the boys who hawk the products there and moved on. Within a few minutes, we started hearing heavy gunshots from our boundary farmland. The whole community was terrified and people started running into the bush. A lot of people slept in the bush that night."

Emeka Ndubisi, a fuel hawker at the Orie Abala Market square, corroborated Okorie's account. He said police and vigilante patrol teams came to the village as he was selling petrol to his customers. "We were in our shades when six security patrol vehicles came to the market square that Tuesday evening," he began. "Before the vans came to a standstill, we saw police and "Bakassi Boys" jumping down with corked guns and charging towards us. We begged them not to shoot us and fled into the bush, leaving several jerry cans of petrol and diesel behind. When we came out of the bush, we did not see a single jerry can in our shades. We learnt that the police and vigilante people had loaded them into their vehicles and drove towards Akrika, where we learnt they were trailing armed robbers."

But the Police Public Relations Officer in the Abia State command, Mr. Ali Okechukwu, explained why security operatives went to Abala. Okechukwu said a bullion van conveying money from one of the first generation banks in Aba had been waylaid while conveying huge sums of money to Owerri on that fateful day. Heavily armed bandits,

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numbering over 50, he said, attacked the van at Orungwa Junction along Aba/Port Harcourt Expressway. With the sophisticated arms at their disposal, the police spokesman said the robbers overpowered the security team that escorted the bullion van. He painted a sad picture of how the bandits killed one of the armed escorts and the bullion van driver. He said, "When the command got the report, we sent a reinforcement including an armoured personnel carrier, but surprisingly, the robbers attacked the APC with dynamite and demobilised it. They succeeded in carting away unspecified sums of money and barely an hour after, we heard the hoodlums were sharing the loot somewhere in Abala."

Okechukwu confirmed that six patrol teams consisting of the JTF and members of the state vigilante services were mobilised to pursue the robbers to Abala, but the operation again failed as the robbers again sprung a surprise on the security operatives. They hit them so hard that only one patrol vehicle went back to base. "It was very disappointing that the robbers ambushed the security operatives, dislodged them and with the help of some youths from the community, burnt five of the six security vans deployed for the operation," he said.

In the past, he said, the command had traced some armed robbers to the area. Besides, he said, when robbers succeed in their operations, they sometimes go to Abala to share their loot.

However, whether the people of the area knew about the bullion van robbery or took part in the sharing of the loot is yet to be established. The reality, however, is that the entire community paid dearly for the actions of a few of its members. The police and vigilante men, who escaped from the scene of the gruesome battle and fled back to Abala villages were not chased away. Rather, some members of the community said they took the tired security operatives in, fed them and dropped them off the next day at Opobo Road, to go back to Aba. Barely 10 hours after they bade their hosts farewell, more than 300 soldiers and policemen invaded the community and started shooting and burning down houses.

A retired senior security operative from the area, who witnessed the horrendous campaign, expressed anger at the action of his former colleagues. He was angry not only because those who took in the wounded policemen and vigilante men were not spared when the community was attacked but also because the innocent were made to suffer for doing nothing. Having served at critical positions during major operations while in service, he said that the invasion of Abala villages was akin to declaring war on helpless citizens. Recounting how the soldiers and policemen ravaged the community, he said, "It was on Wednesday evening. I was returning home after I got somebody to repair my brother's house. As I rode close to my house, I saw my late brother's wife running towards me. I asked her what the problem was and she said the police were coming. I told her to run to safety because I didn't know what had happened. As I rode further, I saw heavily armed policemen and soldiers approaching. They were all rushing towards me with guns pointed in my direction. I stopped the motorcycle and raised my hands up and told them I am a superior police officer. I told them not to point the guns at me."

He said just as the soldiers and policemen passed him, they started shooting as if another civil war had broken out. He continued, "I went inside my house, took my bath, dressed up very well and thought that the kind of shooting I was hearing could result in death. I had to prepare myself very well before death would come. After dressing up, I brought out a mat and a pillow to my parlour. I also brought out a bible and read from the book of Proverbs 18: 10. After I had prayed, I opened the louvres and looked outside, and the shooting was still going on. The village became empty as people fled in all directions. I saw one old man, Mr. Samuel, who has a bad leg limping towards my house, and I shouted from inside, 'You have heard shooting near my house and you are still coming here, do you want them to come and kill me?' I told him to take the bush path and run to the mission where others were taking refuge but the man insisted that I am a police officer and that I would be spared. I told him that the shooting was beyond the ordinary and that anybody could become a victim. I begged him to run to the Salvation Church pastor, and the man left my house. I saw the soldiers with petrol and they started burning everywhere. They hit at houses and destroyed the louvres and roofs."

He said the soldiers and policemen shot at the goats, sheep, hens and dogs that the people left behind. "It was like a warfront, but as a trained security operative, I couldn't run into the bush like others. I rather waited and monitored the situation.

"A woman who operates a bar near the market was holed up in her shop when the soldiers arrived. She was there with two children when it was set on fire. They shouted for help but nobody responded. The fire was burning close to where they were taking refuge. I could not go out to help them because if I was shot, nobody would tell the story. I restrained myself from going out to help her but inside the house, I prayed to God to lay it in the heart of the commander to order his men to suspend the action and move away from the location so that I could go out and rescue the woman and her children before fire would get to them. God answered my prayers as I heard the commandeer shouting and calling them to move to another part of the community. While shooting was still going on in other places, I sneaked out to the burning shop and assisted the woman and her two children to escape to safety. The flame was high into the sky."

An aged blind man, Mr. Nna Nta, could not hold back tears from his blank eyes as he recounted his ordeal. Speaking through an interpreter, he said, "I am blind, my son. The burnt thatched house belonged to me. I was sitting inside when I heard people walking with heavy footfalls towards my house. I heard them hitting the house of my neighbour and I was surprised at what happened. Suddenly, they came to my son's house which is located near my own and started hitting it. I shouted and begged them not to destroy the house and that my son does not live in the village, but they would hear any of that. I heard them pull down my son's house and moved to my own. I shouted that I am a blind man and not a troublemaker. I asked them to tell me what crime I had committed, but they said they didn't have the time to talk to me. I was dragged out of the house by a very strong hand, and as I was being taken away, I heard and smelt fire burning down my house. I fell down as they pushed me out of the house. They tried to beat up my wife for trying to remove a few clothes as the house started burning. They sent us away without allowing us to remove anything. Now, I sleep outside like an animal. I don't have clothes to cover my nakedness. Everything I had went with the house. I am not aware of any incident that could have warranted them to burn down my house. You see, I am blind and I don't go out. It is my wife who goes out to bring food for me to eat. I have not committed any crime and they did not tell me why they destroyed my house."

The Chief Press Secretary to the Abia State Governor, Mr. Sam Hart, said he was not aware that Abala community had been razed down. He said the government never ordered security operatives to invade the community. Hart said reports received from the police indicated that some members of the community connived with the bullion van robbers and attacked security operatives, who went on a recovery operation. Hart said, "That was the last we heard of the matter. But as I am talking to you, the government has taken concerted steps to reach out to the Federal Government to see how these security problems could be resolved once and for all. We have written a letter to the President, asking for an intervention of some sorts. We understand that the criminals were sharing part of their loot with some of the villagers. And when the security operatives came to dislodge the criminals, the villagers supported them to vandalise the security vans. We have not heard about the burning down of the villages or what transpired after the attack on Tuesday. I can only speak on the point of view of the government. The governor could not have ordered the burning down of Abala. He has no such powers. The security agencies would explain what happened."

When confronted with the allegation that the security vehicles used for the operation were burnt with the aid of the jerry cans of petrol and diesel stolen from hawkers in Orie Abala Market square, the PPRO dismissed it. "Our men could not have collected petrol when they were going for such an operation. It is unbelievable. I don't see how people going for an operation, already knowing the nature of the operation, would go with jerry cans of fuels in their cars. The vehicles were already filled before they started going there. I am telling you that they were ambushed. What was the rationale behind carrying fuel? There was nothing like that. The security operatives were ambushed while the loot was being shared in the open. Each time, they go there to share their loot, they throw the money to the community people. The people have been hailing the criminals and when security operatives went there, it was the people who alerted the robbers and the team was ambushed. What is the rationale behind the allegation of policemen carrying cans of petrol. It is unattainable."

A member of the community, who pleaded anonymity, said the community never supported armed robbers. He said it was in the course of fighting crime in the kingdom that its Eze, Chief Wilson Wogu Nnah, and his wife were killed and his house torched by

criminals. Worried by the growing activities of hoodlums, the source said the traditional council had summoned all the indigenes and other residents of Abala in 2008 and threatened to banish those who were giving the area a bad reputation through their involvement in crime. Based on the advice of the state government for the community to sanitise itself, he said the monarch and his council ordered certain persons to leave Abala soil. He recounted, "Shortly after the council took the decision, some gunmen in November last year, invaded the home of our eze and killed him and the wife and set the palace on fire. Instead of looking for the troublemakers, the police came and arrested our chiefs, including the traditional prime minister, and detained them for months. They were granted bail not long ago after so much money was extorted from the old men. Nobody has told us what the outcome of police investigation into the matter was."

The traditional prime minister of the community is said to have been afflicted by stroke shortly after he was released from police cell, following the death of the Eze. He was taken away from his home before the soldiers arrived and set his house ablaze. Today, Umuibe, Umuokorokpo, Nkpukpu Okoro, Umulelu and Umuachilefa, Umu Ogbuji, Azu Ahia, Umu Oparaoku, Umu Chuewunna and Umughoria are lying in ruins. Over 400 houses were burnt down. More than 50 of the houses belonged to serving and retired security men from the area. They included the homes of late Mr. Samuel Ekwenye, a former Deputy Commissioner of Police; his late brother, Mr. Onyike Ekwenye, a former Superintendent of Police; and Mr. Chidi Nwulu, an Assistant Commissioner of Police in Awka, Anambra State.

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