

FEATURE

By our correspondent

These are trying times for the staff of Journalists Against AIDS, a Lagos-based non-governmental organisation, established with a view to curtailing the spread of the dreaded acquired immuno-deficiency syndrome.

A few days ago, the Executive Director of the organisation, Ms. Olayide Akanni, fled the country to France after surviving a suspected assassination bid. Sources close to her told *Saturday Punch* that she visited a hospital in Paris on Thursday, November 5, 2009, where a CT scan was conducted on her prior to a surgery aimed at removing bullets from her spine after she was shot by gunmen.

The attempt on her life on October 6, 2009 coincided with the second year anniversary of the death of her predecessor and founder of JAAIDS, Mr. Omololu Falobi, who was felled by gunmen on October 5, 2007. "On the day Falobi was being remembered by family, friends and acquaintances, Akanni was recuperating in the hospital where some bullets were removed from her thighs. She therefore could not attend the remembrance programme in which she was expected to play a key role," a source said.

It was gathered that Olayide had gone to a branch of a new generation bank in Lagos to withdraw some money meant for a project the organisation was executing, and was returning to her Ogba, Lagos office, not knowing that she was being trailed by two gunmen on a motorcycle.

Her assailants caught up with her around Agidingbi, crossed the vehicle in which she rode and pumped bullets into the back seat where she was seated. A terrified co-occupant of the vehicle and male employee of JAAIDS, identified as Tayo Falobi, was said to have abandoned the vehicle and fled for dear life.

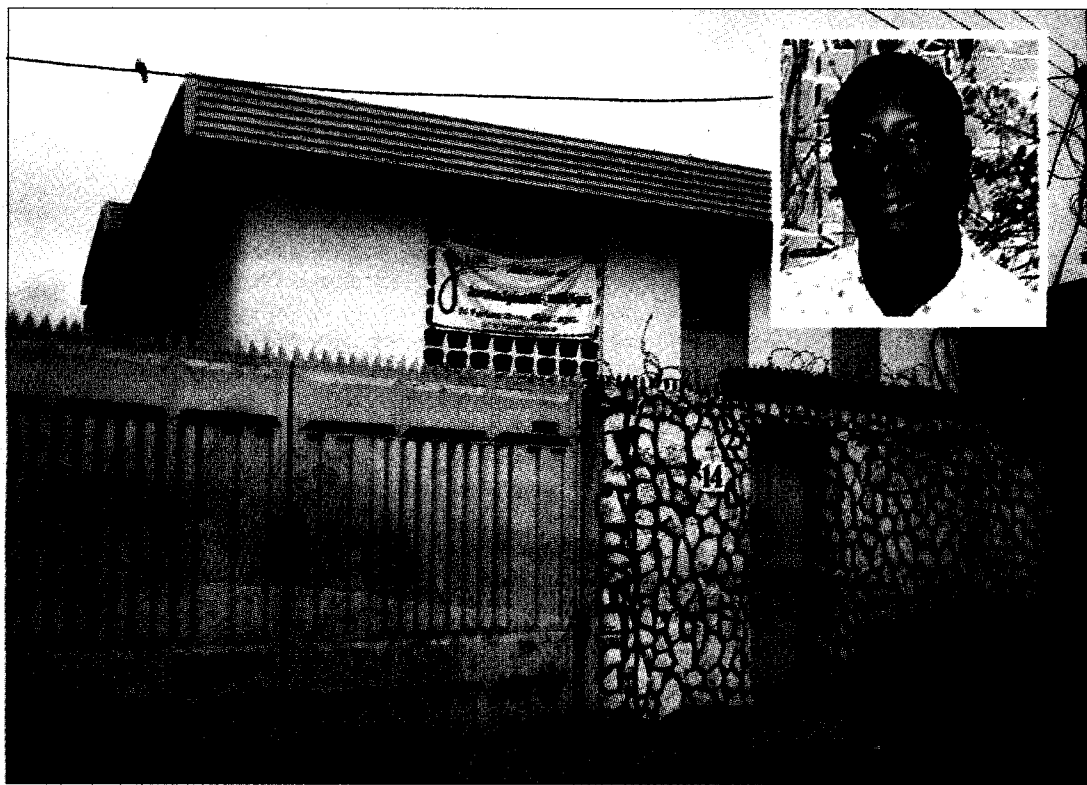
The gunmen were also said to have alighted from the motorcycle and watched Akanni as she writhed in pains. "Where is the money?" they hollered before they looked inside the car and found a bag containing thousands of dollars. They took the money and fled, paving the way for Tayo and some sympathisers in the area to rush Akanni to a nearby hospital. It was gathered that while she survived the attack, some of the bullets that lodged in her body were yet to be extracted at the time she left the country. But for the circumstances that preceded the attack, Akanni would have dismissed it as a robbery incident. Sometimes in September, someone, who concealed his identity, was said to have sent some messages to her mobile phone, telling her that some people were planning to assassinate her.

The informant, who claimed to have made the revelation because he was "born again" reportedly claimed that he got Akanni's number through his brother's diary, after he was instructed by his pastor to tell Akanni about the impending doom so that his sin could be forgiven him.

One of the messages had read thus, "I am now a Christian and I can't keep silent on what I know anymore. I also need to clear my conscience. Please tell her (Akanni) to be very careful and not to go out next week Thursday. If you need more info, I will be glad to help." The messages kept coming, and in one of them, the sender said some people were paid N300,000 to assassinate the late Omololu Falobi, adding that the death of the late journalist was well celebrated by the assassins when they discovered that the police had gone off the mark in their investigations. "After his death, they (assassins) brought home some newspapers where the police claimed that it was armed robbers that killed him and that they had arrested some people.

Death scare at JAAIDS' office as suspected killers of ex-director hunt his associates

• Successor undergoes treatment in France after attack by gunmen



JAAIDS' office in Lagos, inset: late Falobi

So, they started celebrating. They followed him everywhere he went that day before they shot him at close range, and that is what they want to do to Laide in Abuja or Lagos," one of the messages revealed. The messages were said to have rattled Akanni, who informed some of her confidants about them and also tried to put some security measures in place.

Dr. Morenike Ukpog, a lecturer at the Department of Child Health Dental at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, who is also the Coordinator of New HIV Vaccine and Microbicide Advocacy Society (NVHMAS), a biomedical HIV prevention research initiative, told our correspondent, "Olayide sent the transcript of messages she had received to me after I had promised not to share the information with anyone because it was confidential. The transcript of the SMS messages were details of the threat to her life. Akanni was contacted by an informant who gave her the details of the plot to assassinate her."

NVHMAS, a partner organisation to JAAIDS, is also located at 14, Fadare Street, Ogba, Lagos.

Not long after the attack on Akanni, Ukpog's husband also received a strange call. The caller, who concealed his identity, told the husband that Ukpog was the next target of the assassins after Falobi and Akanni. While the poor man could not quite understand the message, his wife tried to explain it to him.

Ukpog said, "I told him I understood the message and I tried to explain to him what was meant by 'two are down.' He knew Omololu (Falobi) but he was not familiar with Olayide's (Akanni) case. So, he did not immediately understand the meaning of the call.

Ukpog told *Saturday Punch* during the week that she could no longer move about freely since her husband received the message. "It has been a terrible experience moving around and feeling that someone is trailing you with a gun. How long would I endure this?" she lamented.

Akanni, who holds a Schengen visa, eventually jetted out of the country on account of her predicament. In an e-mail message to *Saturday Punch* during the week, *Reporters Sans Frontieres*, a media rights group based in Paris, gave an insight into Akanni's condition in France. "She is now in France visiting some doctors, because she has a bullet in her back. At the hospital in Nigeria, they said it was safer to leave the bullet in her body because a surgical intervention would be too tricky and too dangerous. She came here because she had a Schengen visa and in order to see other doctors and be protected from the threats," the source said.

Investigations conducted by *Saturday Punch* revealed that 'resource control' had always been a source of conflict between the leaders of JAAIDS. A member of the Falobi family told our reporter that after a lot of pressure on the late Falobi to step down as the executive director of JAAIDS, he signified his intention to resign and venture into some other things before he was killed. The family member said, "He told us that he would quit in a year's time and would only serve as a consultant to JAAIDS if he was still needed. The people who are fighting over JAAIDS do not know that it would not be easy to take over the organisation like that. It is well structured and even members of Omololu's family cannot do anything about it."

It was gathered that since she succeeded Falobi as the Executive Director of JAAIDS,

Akanni had had it rough with "certain interested parties" the organisation who wanted to take over its affairs. A recent source of discord, it was gathered, was a sum of N40m capacity building grant given to the body by a donor agency. She was said to have complained that some of the text messages she received indicated that the board of the organisation wanted her out because instead of allowing the organisation to share the money, she used it to buy an office property. But Akanni denied this. "That is partly right. We received a grant from the Ford Foundation that would enable us to buy a property as well as do some works in budget tracking. So, the funds were meant for a purpose. And when we bought the property, we actually took some of our board members there so that they could see. Honestly, I do not believe this and I think whoever sent this text is playing

on information and trying to incriminate others," she was quoted as saying. Ukpog, on her own part, said she was accused by the stranger that phoned her husband that she took over an organisation that all of them had established. "My husband recalled that the caller said I took over an organisation they all started. This is strange, as NVHMAS was my vision, which I shared with Omololu (Falobi). I also learnt that there were persons who were discontented with JAAIDS as they felt that Omololu took over the vision that they started together," she said. Apart from the internal wrangling in JAAIDS, the organisation is also locked in combat with other grant-seeking NGOs working in AIDS-related areas who are suspected to be jealous that the organisation has been receiving the greater percentage of the grants doled out by international funding agencies for the fight against AIDS.

It was learnt that the hostilities were at various times openly displayed at international AIDS conferences.

Curiously, the telephone number, +2348055030924, through which the anonymous calls were made had gone dead. When *Saturday Punch* called at the Ogba office of JAAIDS on Monday, the security operatives at the gates were screening visitors while the members of staff on duty looked worried and scared.

Efforts made by our correspondent to get the Police Public Relations Officer in Lagos State, Mr. Frank Mba, were unsuccessful as he was said to have travelled out of the country. His deputy, Mr. Chris Nwaolai, said he was not aware of the case. "If it has been reported in any of the police stations, it will be investigated. Assassination is a very serious crime. Police do not joke with it. Anyone caught will be made to face the music," he said.