

Family battle police for killing breadwinner

The controversial killing of a panel beater, Ukah Ofem, in Calabar, has set his grieving family against the police, who claim he was an armed robbery suspect, writes **MIKE ODIEGWU**

THE death of a panel beater, Mr. Ukah Ofem, who was fondly called "Japan" in Calabar, Cross River state, has continued to generate controversies. Ofem was allegedly shot and killed by the police at about 5:30am on July 28. After he fell to the bullet which was buried in his thigh, Ofem's corpse was also paraded by the Akim Police Division as an armed robber.

On that fateful morning that he was killed, there was an armed robbery operation that sent fears to the spine of residents on Asi Abang Street, Calabar. Sounds of gunshots rent the air as panicky residents tightly shut their doors and hid themselves to avoid being hit by stray bullets. For hours, the robbers ransacked many homes around the area and freely dispossessed the hapless residents of their money and valuables.

After the staccato sounds of gunshots had died down, it was later learnt that the deafening gun duel ensued when the robbers ran into a detachment of police officers who were sent to dislodge them.

But after the gun battle, the police returned to their station with the lifeless body of Ofem. His remains which were dumped on the floor for several hours attracted droves of curious passersby who came to catch a glimpse of the supposed armed robber. Suddenly, a worrisome twist to the matter emerged. While the police claimed Ofem was shot as an armed robber during an exchange of gunfire between them and members of his gang, the family of the deceased maintained that their breadwinner was a victim of extra-judicial killing.

Obviously, the family members are not resting in their attempt to make the police pay for what they described as the "gruesome murder of their son". Already, they have cried out to the legal firm of Ewah Obi-Mgbato and Associates to assist them in bringing the killers of Ofem to book. A lawyer who spoke to *SUNDAY PUNCH* on behalf of the grieving family, Mr. Michael Onen, profusely faulted the claims of the police. He said Ofem was killed within the premises of his workshop at No. 5 Mbora Etata Street, off Old Ikang, Calabar and not at the scene of the crime.

He said there were discrepancies in the statements of the police. First was the outfit the deceased wore when he was killed. At the time he was shot, he alleged that Ofem was in shorts and polo T-shirt, but that his dressing was changed to his working clothes when he was paraded on the Cross River Broadcasting Corporation's television. Based on his discoveries, he formulated some posers for the police.

"Can the deceased go for a robbery operation with empty hands yet engage the police in exchange of gunfire as he was not found with even a toy gun? Is it really possible that an armed robber caught in a cross-fire would neatly be shot below the thigh rather than any other part of his upper body? Is it not possible that the gunshot that killed the deceased was fired from close range leading to vibration of his body? He claimed that the police,



•Ofem

instead of displaying weapons commonly used by armed robbers, paraded hammers and cutlasses allegedly carted away by them from the deceased's workshop.

He alleged that the police simply entered the workshop and shot dead the panel beater only to turn around and label him an armed robber. He asserted that Ofem was a victim of a set-up. "We are bold to say that the gunshot that killed the deceased was fired in his premises at about 5.30 am on the fateful day. With all humility, the deceased is innocent that is why we are calling for a thorough investigation," he said.

Describing the deceased, he said, "He was a well known panel-beater who has practised his trade within and outside the

shores of Nigeria and was nicknamed 'Japan' in the Republic of Liberia, where he spent a greater part of his life. He was a law-abiding citizen who had never been known throughout his life time to be a thief not to talk of being an armed robber. His unimpeachable character could be attested to by his clients, business associates and colleagues."

Also, the younger brother to the deceased, Mr. Samson Inah, said the killing of his elder brother was surprising and unacceptable. He said his late brother was a well known panel beater who had never stolen from anyone. "I stayed with him for a long time even while we were in Liberia. He was known all over for panel beating and spraying. We came back from Liberia to Calabar because of the war in that country. We came and established in the same business. If he had been a thief, there is no way I wouldn't have known," he said.

He claimed that after Ofem was killed the police stormed his workshop, arrested

some of his apprentices, including one of his younger brothers and his son. He added that the police ransacked his home and carted away items including TV, fridges, mattresses and chairs.

However, on what Ofem could be doing outside at 5.30 am despite the scary gunshots, Onen said the deceased house was located within the premises of his workshop and could have been out to ease himself when he was hit by the police bullet. He insisted that the police should conduct an independent and firm investigation into the matter and called on them to make the remains of Ofem available to his parents for burial. Already, he has petitioned the Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Ogbonna Onovo.

But the police have profusely countered the position of the deceased's family insisting that Ofem was killed at the scene of the crime during a shootout. The Police Public Relations Officer, Mr. Etim Dickson, said contrary to the claims of the family, the body of the deceased was recovered from Old Ikang-Big Qua axis where the armed robbers confronted the police.

Narrating how Ofem was killed, he said: "There was a distress call from the police control room to move to No. 3 Asi Abang Street, Calabar and its environs to confront armed robbers who were already operating there. The team on arriving the street was informed that the armed robbers had successfully robbed many occupants and had moved to rob other persons at Old Ikang-Big Qua axis of the town.

"On sighting the police patrol team, the armed robbers fired at the police. The patrol team returned fire and at the end of the gun duel one of the armed robbery suspects was found dead inside the Old Ikang-Big Qua big gutter. The deceased had a bullet wound injury on his left leg."

He said that some of the victims of the armed robbery who he named as Onyeka Emperor, Patricia Ike, Okom Effiom, Joseph Edet and Caleb Emagha identified Ofem as one of the hoodlums that attacked them. Dickson asserted that weapons and stolen properties of the victims were recovered from the body and premises where Ofem lay dead.

Specifically, he said that one Samsung SGH480 handset belonging to one of the robbery victims, Onyekah Emperor, was retrieved from the body of the deceased adding that the victim also identified a machete recovered from the body of Ofem as one of the weapons used by the hoodlums during the incident.

Despite how the police have tried to prove that Ofem was shot as a member of a notorious armed robbery gang during a gun duel, the family of the deceased has insisted that its breadwinner was a victim of a set-up. But as the controversies rage, the real circumstances that led to the death of "Japan" may be left for the court to determine.

“He claimed that the police, instead of displaying weapons commonly used by armed robbers, paraded hammers and cutlasses allegedly carted away by them from the deceased's workshop”