

news

Rivers crisis: Police shoot pro-Amaechi senator

Akasike Chukwudi

THE political crisis in Rivers State worsened on Sunday when operatives of the state Police Command fired tear gas and shot the lawmaker representing Rivers South-East Senatorial District, Senator Magnus Abe, with rubber bullets.

Abe and the Chief of Staff, Government House, Port Harcourt, Chief Tony Okocha, had gone to the venue of a rally organised by the Save Rivers Movement, a mobilisation group of the All Progressives Congress, at the College of Arts and Science in Rumuola, Port Harcourt.

Unconfirmed report had it that two children who were on their way to church in company with their mother, were choked to death by the tear-gas.

Two rubber bullets, according to sources, hit Abe on the leg and chest while Okocha and others took a large dose of the tear-gas.

At the Krisany Hospital in Port Harcourt, where the senator was rushed to, the Medical Director, Dr. McKay Anyanwu, said he (lawmaker) had internal bleeding after being hit by the bullets.

Anyanwu told journalists that Abe came in a state of shock evidenced by low blood pressure. He said, "He was unable to talk or eat and he was feeling restless as a result of a traumatic shock. The implication is that there is haemorrhage; this is a blood trauma, it is not a sharp one."

"So, we don't know the layers that are affected. This can only be detected through the use of MRI."

"We have given the necessary resuscitative medication. Bleeding internally (haemorrhage). If you check the two sides of chests, the affected side is so enlarged as compared to the unaffected area. "My immediate concern was to revive him. It was later that I was told that he was hit by rubber bullets."

A United States-based Nigerian news portal, *Saharareporters* reported that Abe was later flown to an undisclosed hospital for further treatment.

It was gathered that more than 25 Hilux vehicles loaded with policemen stormed the venue of the rally at about 8.20am and began to fire tear gas and rubber bullets.

The policemen who blocked both ends of Rumuola Road were said to have destroyed canopies and communication equipment put in place for the rally.

At Rumuokuta Roundabout, overzealous armed policemen harassed motorists at will, stopped and searched their boots before turning them back.

At the College of Arts and Science, a batch of policemen was seen marching towards Rumuokuta Roundabout, chanting triumphant songs.

However, one of the victims of the police harassment was the Bureau Chief of the Sun Newspaper, Mr. Chris Anucha, who was hit with the nozzle of a gun.

"One of the policemen hit me with the nozzle of his gun and ordered me to run," Anucha told some of his colleagues in Port Harcourt.

The incident had caused pandemonium within the area as passersby who had inhaled tear gas scampered to safety.

Okocha, who later spoke on the attack, explained that he escaped death by a whisker.

He accused the state Commissioner of Police, Mr. Joseph Mbu, of mobilising all the police formations in the state to cause confusion at the venue of the rally.

He said, "The state police commissioner ordered operatives from all formations to the venue of our rally."

"We had written the police to inform them that we would hold a rally today (Sunday). But

they still came here to destroy all that we put in place for the rally."

He also accused the supervising Minister of Education, Chief Nyesom Wike, of influencing the police to dislodge the APC supporters.

"I received a call from somebody highly placed, informing me that the Commissioner of Police had been reached by the Minister for Education ... to dislodge our people today (Sunday) and I couldn't place it."

"About 4.30am today (Sunday), our men on the ground called me to say that the police had taken over the place. I had to go there to see things."

"Tear gas was fired at me as if I was a rabbit. I ran into someone's house and saw his children suffocating. We were quarantined in the man's house."

The state government also issued a statement in which it claimed that Governor Rotimi Amaechi was the target of the police attack.

The Commissioner for Information and Communications, Mrs. Ibim Semenitari, who signed the statement, explained that Amaechi was billed to be present at the rally.

She described the shooting of Abe as an attack on innocent citizens and a rape of democracy.

The commissioner said, "The Rivers State Government has it on good authority that Senator Abe took the bullet originally meant

for Governor Amaechi who was billed to be present at the event."

"This is disconcerting especially in the light of recent revelations that the Presidency may be training snipers ahead of the 2015 elections and that Governor Amaechi is top on the list of those to be eliminated."

"Today, Sunday January 12, 2014, Rivers State witnessed another senseless attack on innocent citizens in a continuous rape of democracy by the Joseph Mbu-led Rivers State police command."

"Today's (Sunday) attack on members of the Save Rivers Movement, a non-governmental association at the College of Arts and Science, Rumuola, Port Harcourt, and especially the unprovoked shooting of Senator Abe, is cause for worry and an indication of the length that the PDP is willing to go to silence opposing views."

The commissioner reiterated the call for Mbu's redeployment before he turned the state into a graveyard through his unprofessional behaviour.

Semenitari appealed to the people of the state to remain law-abiding and not to take laws into their own hands, saying, "We promise to continue to use all legitimate and legal means to guarantee the safety of our people and their rights to exist in Nigeria."

The state chapter of the APC described the incident as a premeditated attempt on the life of the senator.

"The APC is convinced that this attempted murder was premeditated. The senator only went to the rally to see how prepared the organisers were," the party's chairman in the state, Dr. Davies Ikanya, told journalists.

Ikanya, who claimed that "Abe was shot at close range," added that Okocha was also injured while whereabouts of a former member of the state House of Assembly, Ike Chinwo, who was also at the venue, were unknown.

He said, "As we speak, Chinwo is missing because he was at the scene of the incident. He may have been taken away by the police. Five children are dead because of the intensity of the tear-gas. This is barbaric and it is not acceptable."

But the Public Relations Officer of the state Police command, Mr. Ahmad Mohammad, said the organisers of the rally did not apply for a permit to hold the rally.

Mohammad however denied the claim that Abe was injured by policemen.

Mohammad said, "I can confirm to you that Senator Abe was not shot. The police did not expend any single bullet while dispersing the crowd."

"It is not true. The police did not shoot the senator, we only used minimum force to disperse the crowd at the venue of the rally. They (organisers) are telling lies about the situation."

Bulletproof cars: Presidential panel indicts Oduah

Fidelis Soriwei and Olalekan Adetayo

THE committee set up by President Goodluck Jonathan to probe the N255m bulletproof car scandal in the aviation ministry has indicted the Minister, Ms. Stella Oduah.

It was gathered in Abuja on Sunday that the report of the presidential committee tallied with some findings of the House of Representatives Committee on Aviation on the scandal.

In October, there were reports that with the approval of the minister, the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority purchased two bulletproof BMW cars at an allegedly inflated rate of N255m.

The development sparked a countrywide controversy with many Nigerians and groups calling for her sacking.

The House subsequently mandated its Committee on Aviation to probe the allegation against the minister.

On December 19, 2013, the House endorsed the report of its committee and agreed that the minister breached the 2013 Appropriation Act.

It therefore asked Jonathan to review Oduah's appointment for approving expenditure of over N643m for the NCAA to procure 54 vehicles last year.

The spokesperson for the House, Mr. Zackary Mohammed, had explained that the lawmakers wanted the minister sacked.

He said, "The word 'review' here means a change in status. It is a mild way of saying that Mr. President should sack the minister."

A major recommendation of the Aviation committee, which was adopted, reads, "The House urges the President to review the continued engagement of the Minister of Aviation, Stella Oduah, for having contravened the Appropriation Act, 2013 and the approved, revised thresholds by exceeding the Ministry of Aviation's approval limit of N100m by the purchase of 54 vehicles valued at N643m."

Although Jonathan confirmed the receipt of the report of the presidential committee chaired by a former Head of Service of the

Federation, Alhaji Sali Bello, he had yet to make a pronouncement on it.

Other members of the presidential panel included the National Security Adviser, Col Sambo Dasuki and Vice-Marshal Dick Iruenabhere.

It was learnt on Sunday that the panel, like that of the House, also discovered that the minister's approval for the cars exceeded the N100m limit.

A top government source, who disclosed this to *The PUNCH* on Sunday, said although the committee indicted Oduah, it did not say whether she should be sacked or not.

But sources told *The PUNCH* that there was every likelihood of the President using the cabinet shake-up that would follow the presentation of his ministerial list to the National Assembly to relieve himself of the moral burden of Oduah's continued presence in his government.

One of the sources said Jonathan did not take any action on the matter when the issue was raging last year because it was not in his character to be seen as being stampeded into taking any decision.

He said, "Those who know oga knows that he is not the kind of person that can be stampeded into taking a decision. That was why he remained calm in the face of the public calls for the minister's sacking last year."

"As it is now, since he is planning a cabinet shake-up, he may use the opportunity to ease the woman out. After all, during shake-up like the one being planned, he owes no one any explanation. He has the power to hire and fire."

Another official was more categorical in his claim that Oduah might not escape the imminent shake-up.

The minister's issue, according to him, came up when the President was preparing his response to an 18-page letter written to him by former President Olusegun Obasanjo.

He said, "The consensus then was that Mr. President could explain all the issues raised in Obasanjo's letter convincingly except the area that bordered on corruption."

"The observation people made that time was that it would be difficult to claim that the President did not harbour corruption with the continuous stay of Oduah in the cabinet at the time of replying the letter considering the calls by members of the public."

Efforts to get the Presidency's position on the presidential committee's report did not yield positive result as the Special Adviser to the President on Media and Publicity, Dr. Reuben Abati, did not respond to the calls made to his mobile telephone lines.

Meanwhile, former governors Abdulkadir Kure (Niger), Boni Haruna (Adamawa) and an ex-National Security Adviser, Gen. Aliyu Gusau (retd.) are among those whose names may be sent to the Senate this week by Jonathan for consideration as ministers.

It was learnt that a former Nigerian Ambassador to Ghana, Senator Musiliu Obanikoro, also made the list.

Jonathan had during a meeting with a delegation of the Peoples Democratic Party from the North-West last Thursday given an indication that the list would be sent to the National Assembly this week.

It was learnt that the inclusion of Kure and Haruna on the list was to counter their state governors who were seen to be opposing the President.

Governor Murtala Nyako of Adamawa State is one of the five Peoples Democratic Party governors who recently defected to the All Progressives Congress.

Although Governor Babangida Aliyu of Niger State has yet to formally defect, he is being seen in government circle as just marking time especially since the claim that Jonathan signed a one-term agreement started from him.

Obanikoro, a former governorship candidate of the PDP in Lagos State, is also believed to have enough political clout to rally support for the President in the state.

It was gathered that the inclusion of Gusau was meant to shore up support for the President in the North-West, where many chieftains of the PDP had defected to the APC.

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