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Terrorism: Anxiety over use of chemical weapons in North

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Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Mohammed Abubakar

There was anxiety in different parts of the country on Friday, following reports that some insurgents were in possession of chemical or biological weapons.

During the week, speculation was rife that some of the victims of an attack on Shengev community in Gwer West Local Government Council, Benue State were killed with chemical or biological weapons. Fifteen victims of the Shengev attack, said to have been launched by yet-to-be-identified insurgents, were seen with foam in their mouths. The corpses had neither bullet wounds nor machete cuts on their bodies.

About two weeks ago, five people died in a similar manner in Guma Local Government Area of the State. The Commissioner for Information, Justin Amase, on Friday told journalists that the victims died after inhaling a chemical substance.

"We suspect that some chemicals were used on the victims. Their bodies were then set on fire to destroy any evidence," he reportedly said.

Worried by the development, the Presidency on Friday said President Goodluck Jonathan had ordered the Inspector-General of Police, Mohammed Abubakar, to investigate the weapons used in the killings.

Senior Special Assistant to the President on Public Affairs, Doyin Okupe, disclosed this in an interview with our correspondent.

He said, "This matter has been brought to the attention of the President. I am aware that he has been briefed by Governor Gabriel Suswan.

"The issues about the chemical weapons are things that eyewitnesses have mentioned but nobody has actually verified it.

"Although people have talked about it, you have to be an expert and really examine people who have died to know exactly what we are talking about."

Meanwhile, the Benue State Government has launched an investigation into the circumstances leading to the deaths of the victims of the two attacks. The Special Adviser (Media) to Governor Gabriel Suswan, Dr. Cletus Akwaya, told *SUNDAY PUNCH* on Friday that Suswan had directed the state commissioner for health to carry out an autopsy on the victims.

He said, "The locals said biological or chemical weapons were used by the terrorists. They made the claim when they recovered bodies in Shengev community. The dead bodies had no gunshot wounds or cuts; the people who died had foam coming out of their mouths."



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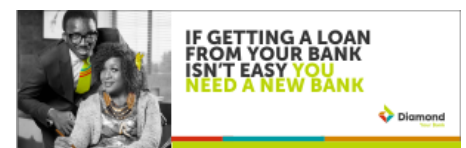
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Over the weekend, there were signs that the authorities in the states close to Benue were also worried that terrorists could use chemical or biological weapons in their domains. The Adamawa State governor, Murtala Nyako, called for an investigation into the Benue killings.

The governor, who spoke through his Director of Press and Public Affairs, Ahmad Sajo, said, 'Our view is that things like these make the need for state police necessary. Everything that is happening is not being investigated by the federal police. Even when they do, they don't publish the outcome in such a way that it can allay public fears.'

The state Police Public Relations Officer, Cross River State Police Command Mr. Hogan Bassey, said the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Kola Sodipo, had discussed the matter with his operational heads, including divisional police officers. Cross River is one of the neighbouring states to Benue. Bassey also added that all police formations in the state had been put on red alert.

"We do not need to wait for things to happen before we put our house in order. We have put security measures in place to checkmate this new trend," he said.

The Security Adviser to the Cross River governor, Mr. Rekpene Bassey, also charged security operatives to tackle the challenge posed by the challenge.

He said, "If it is a new trend, the security operatives should be able to rise up to the development."

In Bayelsa State, the state executive council reportedly discussed the new tactic at its weekly executive meeting. According to the Commissioner for Information, Mr. Markson Fefegha, security agencies have been tasked afresh with the responsibilities of monitoring strange movements in the state in order to prevent such attacks.

Fefegha said, "With the security situation in the country, it is obvious every state is on guard. The issue was discussed in the last executive meeting of the state and we agreed that strange faces in any area of the state should be reported to the police."

In Rivers State, the State Commissioner for Information and Communications, Mrs. Ibim Semenitari, told *SUNDAY PUNCH* that apart from government, Nigerians should be concerned about the new trend.

Describing the use of chemical weapons as dangerous, Semenitari called on the Federal Government and security agencies to put measures in place to counter the new tactic of terrorists in order to protect Nigerians wherever they reside.

"The resort to chemical weapons by terrorists is worrisome not only to government at any level; it is also a serious concern to Nigerians. The use of such sophisticated method is dangerous and we think the Federal Government and other stakeholders must put heads together to find a way to counter terrorists' antics. It is a security issue that concerns life and death and that is why everything must be done to protect the lives of Nigerians," the commissioner said.

The Akwa Ibom State Police Command said it would be proactive in ensuring that such chemicals were not imported into the state. The command Public Relations Officer in the state, Mr. Etim Dickson, said, "We have a bomb disposal unit that takes care of anything gaseous and more. Although this incident has not occurred in the state, we have taken a number of precautions like positioning our bomb disposal unit in public places such as motor parks; churches; airports; seaports, or any other place that attracts large gatherings."

In Ekiti State, the Commissioner for Information in Ekiti State, Mr. Tayo Ekundayo, said the state government had set up a committee to monitor the activities of Fulani herdsman. He added that soldiers were at different entry points into the state to prevent what happened in Benue.

In his reaction to the issue, Executive Director, Civil Society Legislative and Advocacy Centre, Auwal Musa Rafsanjani, demanded a thorough investigation into the claims.

He said, "We have to ask questions. Government has a lot of explanations to do if it is true that such a thing is happening. I think if Boko Haram has that kind of weapon, they will use it in the fight against the military. I think this is something that should be investigated."

A security expert, Mr. Mike Ejiofor, who was a director of the State Security Service, told *SUNDAY PUNCH*, that the use of chemical weapons by terrorists in Nigeria was a dangerous development.

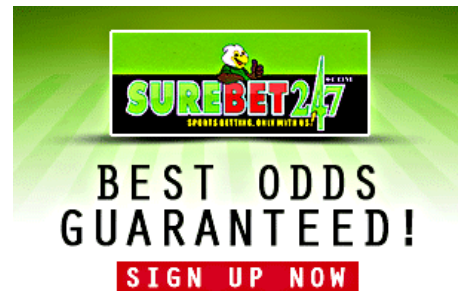
He said, "This is a very dangerous dimension in the crisis but we have to wait for the result of the autopsy. One thing that has been established is that there were no gunshot wounds or machete wounds on the victims. That suggests that some other means must have been used. They said the victims foamed from the mouth; that means chemicals must have been used. It calls for urgent investigation from the security agencies."

Ejiofor added that the international community would also be worried about the use of chemical weapons in

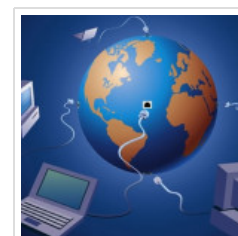


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conflicts in Nigeria and might want to investigate it.

"The United Nations has outlawed the use of chemical weapons. I don't see why gun men would be using chemical weapons against fellow Nigerians. It's a very dangerous development that must be monitored and government should handle it effectively," he said.

The ex-SSS director said there were many dangerous chemicals that could be deployed in conflicts.

When contacted, the Director of Defence Information, and the Coordinator, Joint Information Centre Counter Terrorism Campaign, Maj. Gen. Chris Olukolade, said he was not aware of the development.

Olukolade said, "We have not had any incident of the use of biological weapons."

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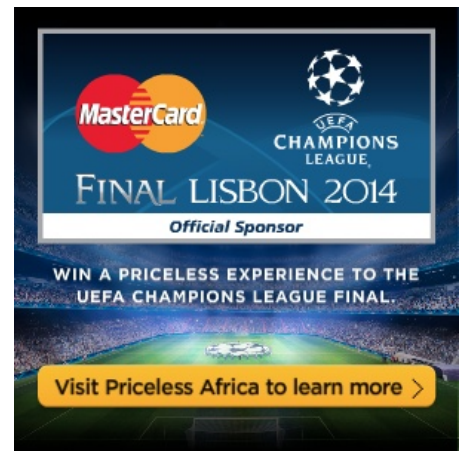
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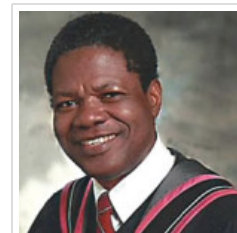
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