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Police must combat scourge of ritual killings

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Inspector-General of Police, Mohammed Abubakar

THE unfolding horror at Soka forest, Ibadan, Oyo State, where up to 20 half-dead persons were rescued from ritual killers' slaughter house, highlights the persistent failure of the Nigerian state to protect its own citizens. The discovery of the death forest right at the centre of a bustling city was remarkable, but it was not the first. However, the government and its security agencies should resolve to make it the last.

Ritual killings occur elsewhere, once in a very long while, but usually involve a few victims. However, in Nigeria, it

has become a factory-like operation. In its account of the horror find, the Oyo State Government said about 100 youths, on a mission to locate two missing commercial motorcyclists, stumbled on a large expanse of land with an uncompleted building, where they found five persons —among them, two women—chained, unkempt and disoriented. Also found were scores of human skeletons scattered all over the settlement, some weapons and underground compartments. About 20 people were eventually rescued, "half dead," according to Festus Adedayo, Governor Abiola Ajimobi's spokesman.

Some of the victims, despite the ravages of the physical and psychological abuse they had undergone, recounted how they had been chained for months by their captors; and how some other captives were taken away, never to be seen again. The Oyo State Police Command should explain how such a camp operated for so long, unnoticed by its men. This was a replay of the saga in Ebonyi State, where in 2008, residents, tired of police inaction over reports of suspicious behaviour, stormed a forest in Ini Enugu-Ezike in the Igboeze Eze North Local Government Area, where they found fresh and decomposing human corpses in a shrine and its surrounding. The press promptly tagged it an "evil forest."

In Ogun State, police also failed to provide adequate explanation for failing to detect a complex in Ibafo that residents uncovered in 2007, which had multi-apartment network of shrines and human slaughter slabs. Many will remember the infamous Okija shrine in Anambra State that was busted a decade ago, where human remains were similarly in evidence.

Killing for ritual has joined kidnapping, armed robbery and terrorism, as a major social ill. Globally, police group it under human sacrifice —the act of killing a person as an offering to a deity or as part of a religious ritual. Across the country, ritual killers are stalking the innocent, to kill and use their body parts for money-making rituals, and acquisition of supernatural power, position or protection.

In Nigeria, ritual killing thrives on a tenacious belief in superstition and the desperation of some people to make money by any means. The practice also cuts across social classes: the rich, to acquire power and for protection; the poor, to become rich. A good example is a middle-aged man

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who in May 2013, in Oke Opo, Ilesa, Osun State, was caught in the act of dismembering a man he had killed. Or one Ifeanyi, a commercial motorcyclist, who delivered his passenger, Helen, 51, to ritual killers, who then beheaded her, took her head, breasts and private parts away for money-making rituals.

Reports by residents and neighbours of uncovered ritual dens detail how patrons in expensive cars, denoting their high status in society, visit the shrines at odd hours to purchase human parts for rituals. In a report to the African Commission on Human Rights in November 2010, Leo Igwe, a rights activist, said, "Human beings are still being hunted down, mutilated, murdered or sacrificed for ritual purposes." He said vulnerable members of the population — the poor, women, children, the aged and people with disabilities, including the insane — are often the victims. Ritual killers particularly seek hunchbacks. Even the dead are not safe, as grave robbers frequently invade cemeteries to remove body parts for sale, like the man caught recently in Ogun State with 22 human heads he had harvested from graves.

The federal and state governments should treat this pervasive scourge with seriousness. Police have for long identified dangerous spots across the country for kidnapping, but often failed to consistently act on many reports and leads, including reports at police stations by escaped victims. They should thoroughly debrief escaped victims and locate the scores of ritual killing dens. Effective follow-up should be a serious detective work to track down all those involved and to locate similar camps.

In response to isolated cases of ritual killings, the South African police have set up an Occult Investigation Unit. India, battling vestiges of centuries of traditional ritual killing, swiftly investigates and prosecutes suspects. The Inspector-General of Police should direct all state police commands to set up special units in all zonal formations to handle ritual killings and kidnapping for rituals. State governors need to work closely with the police by setting up and strengthening neighbourhood watch groups as well as hot lines and email addresses to collate information from the public. The Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps needs to take active responsibility in tracking ritual kidnappers' hideouts in addition to its pipeline protection duties.

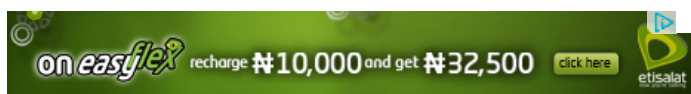
Human life is sacrosanct and should not be desecrated. All Nigerians should rise up to fight the cruelty of ritual killing by being vigilant, reporting any suspicious movement or activity to the police, while community associations and traditional authorities should mobilise their people to cooperate with the police in unmasking shrines and kidnappers' hideouts. The Police should henceforth act promptly on all credible reports by the public.

The Police, Oyo government and other states where ritual killers have been recently uncovered should leave no stone unturned in nabbing all the perpetrators, speedily and thoroughly prosecuting them.

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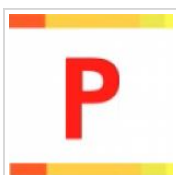


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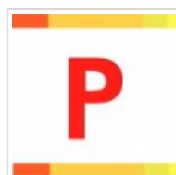
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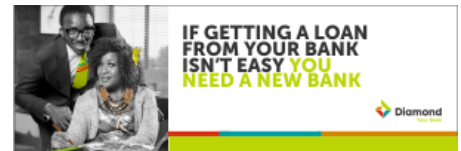
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