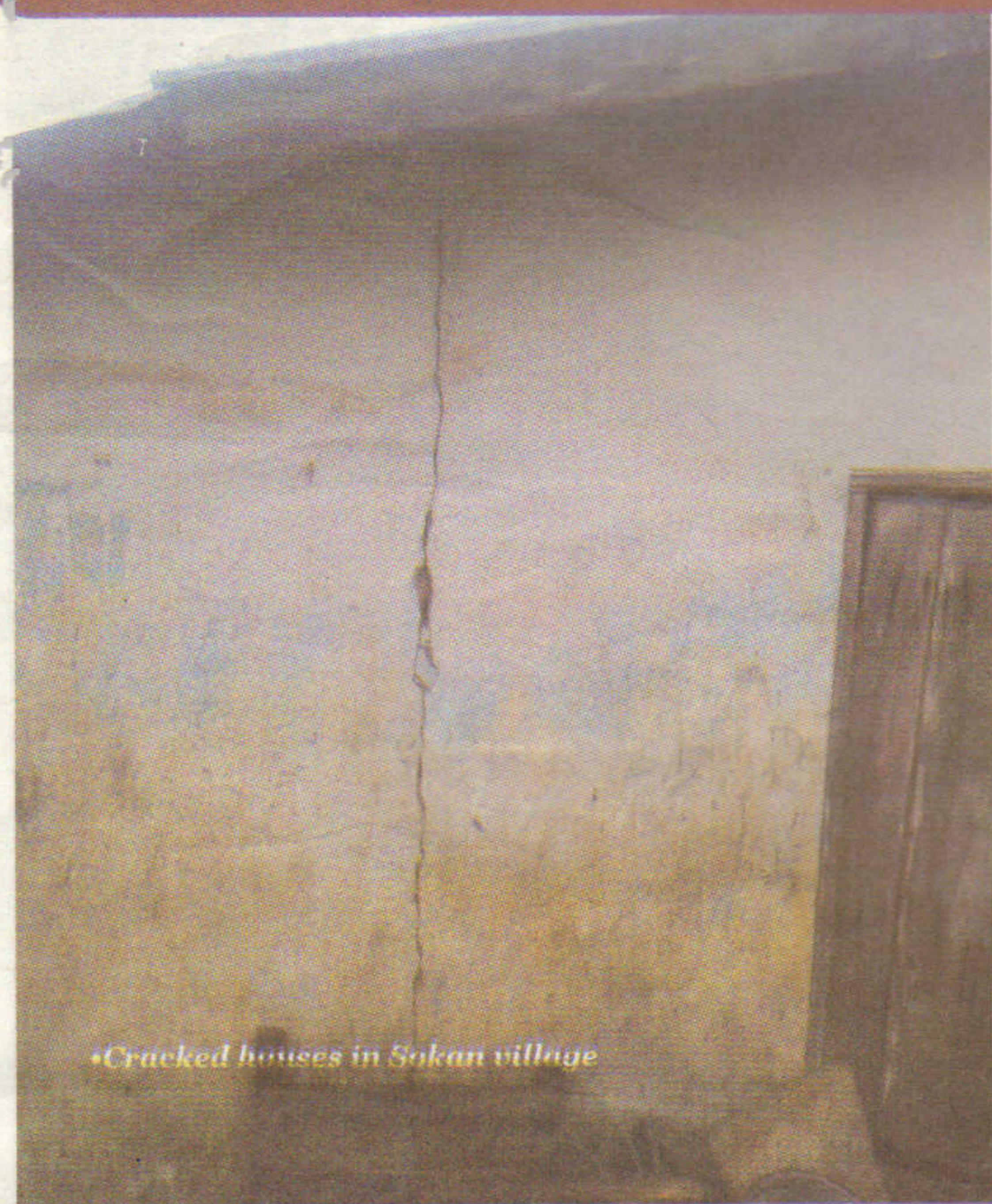


NATURE'S GIFT

Harrowing experiences where killer stones



Cracked houses in Sokan village



Photos: Eric Dumo

Eric Dumo

Clutching on tightly to her two-year-old sibling, Labake Oladele, nine, ran as fast as her tiny legs could carry her. Two huge stones had just landed inches away from where she and other kids were playing that afternoon. The thunderous bang abruptly punctured their 'party', sending the little children scampering in different directions for safety. For Labake and dozens of kids in Sokan, a small community tucked away in the slopes of Odeda town in Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State, the chilling experience is not a completely new one these days. Killer stones flying towards the village in droves from a nearby quarry – Krisjam Investment Limited – at different times of the day have become one sad phenomenon they have grown to know. Even the old within the community have no answer to the disturbing situation. Everybody takes to their heels once the stones come raining down.

It has been two solid years of fear and anxiety for the people of Sokan. Since the arrival of the quarry in the area in 2012, life has suddenly taken a different turn for many households and individuals within the community. Constant blasting of heavy stones from the mining facility and the vibration that comes along with it, now contribute in making the people's lives hellish. Wherever you turn to in this village, cracked walls, shattered roofs and frustrated faces are all you see – a huge testimony to the threat the people now face. The massive deposit of rock-stones – nature's gift to the community – is now the locals' biggest nightmare. Residents told *Saturday PUNCH* how their once serene and happy existence has been extinguished by fear and uncertainty.

"We don't have peace of mind anymore," Sunday Ogundimu, a 70-year-old farmer in Sokan told our correspondent. "This is the second year that we are

facing this problem. The roof of my house has been partially destroyed as a result of stones blasted from the quarry crashing on it.

"The children are always in shock. They don't understand what type of sound it is and so they run and hide in the house as fast as their legs can carry them whenever the blast goes off.

"We have been to the local government several times to complain about the situation but the officials have done nothing about it. The mother of the king of Odeda is from Sokan, so if he insists that he doesn't want the quarry in our village to remain, they would be gone. But he has also done nothing about the situation and we are now suffering in silence while the quarry operators profit from our own resource. We are really saddened by the situation," he said.

The leader of the community, Aremu Oguntola, 81, is also troubled by the latest development. He explained to *Saturday PUNCH* what daily living now looks like for many of Sokan's inhabitants.

"What our eyes have seen, our mouths cannot tell it all," he began. "One of our sons established a poultry farm here but it is the quarry that destroyed it with huge stones regularly flying from the site during blasting. It killed the birds and destroyed the entire roof and facility. It has been a terrible experience for us.

"The quarry owners do not care about our safety. Instead, they have made day and night miserable for us. It is not as if we are benefitting anything from them. There is no single person from Sokan who has been employed by the quarry since the owners started operating about three years ago. All the people working there are outsiders. We benefit nothing from them.

"Even when we are working on our farms, we are constantly on the look-out for flying stones.

The stones can kill if they hit you with the kind of force with which they fly out during blasting. So we want them to vacate our land before we all lose our lives," he said.

Narrating to our correspondent how their present ordeal began, Oguntola revealed that all those who should come to their rescue have continued to look the other way. Only a miracle, he concedes, can turn things around for them.

"The quarry owners came to buy stones here some time ago but later bought the land from some of our people," he explains. "It was a fraudulent deal. They capitalised on our illiteracy to exploit and punish us. If you hear the amount they bought that place, you will be shocked. We have been cheated gravely because the entire village has benefitted nothing from the quarry.

"The local government and police have all been bribed and that is why they cannot do anything about it. We have been to these two places several times but nothing has been forthcoming. We have been making efforts on this matter and in fact the case is in court as we speak. Some of our people took the matter to court. It's been over one year but nothing has come out of it yet. We are calling on the government to please come to our rescue before we all die from this torment," he said.

The heavy blasts from Krisjam Investment Limited have left more than just cracked walls and leaking roofs behind in this agrarian settlement – there are more devastating hallmarks on the landscape.

"We have several people who have developed hearing problems and have also died as a result of this problem," Christiana Oladapo, a 52-year-old mother of five said. "It was the blast that killed an elderly woman earlier this year. She was trying to run into her house when the blast went off but she fell to the ground and fainted. She developed a serious illness from that day and eventually died shortly afterwards.

"Since the company was established here, our

lives have been made miserable by the constant and heavy blasting from the quarry. Once the blasting goes off, we take to different directions. This is why our lives have been turned to today," she said.

Last year, at the height of the crisis, Sokan's only school, St. Paul Anglican Primary School, was shut down by the local government and its pupils moved to another school about three kilometers away from the town. The village has no hospital of its own, clean drinking water, electricity, good roads or any other basic necessity to make life worthwhile for its people. Despite housing huge deposits of rock-stones and contributing significantly to the national economy, much of Sokan lay prostrate, without a form of development. It has been like this for a long time and might remain so, at least in the foreseeable future.

Manager of Krisjam Investment Limited, Mr. Peter Atanda, while explaining to our correspondent how the company's operations started in Sokan, revealed measures being taken to ease the people's pains. He denied that their facility was now a threat to the existence of the community or to Odeda as a whole.

"It is not true that stones from our facility destroyed the entire village. Even when the Baale of the village and some of their people came to us to complain about some of these problems, I sent some of my workers to go and verify the claims and compensated them for the damage immediately.

"Recently, we gave some of them roofing sheets, woods and other items to repair their houses. Before we blast, we always blow sirens to alert them that they can stay in a safe place. Also, I make sure that two of our workers are always on ground in the village to communicate with us in the mine during such periods. We are mindful of the people's safety and that is why we subscribe to care and safety of the highest standard.

"On the issue of the land, we bought that place