

How Sokoto lost 67 people to boat accident, banditry

Published July 21, 2018



DPs camp Photos: Adeniyi Olugbemi

• Scenes at the IDPs camp Photos: Adeniyi Olugbemi

Adeniyi Olugbemi, Sokoto

As the state was recovering from a boat accident that claimed twenty two lives, scores were being killed in a daylight gruesome murder in Tabanni and surrounding villages in Rabah Local Government Area.

Director-General, Sokoto State Emergency Management Agency, SEMA, Ibrahim Dingyadi, confirmed to our correspondent that a canoe with thirty passengers capsized at Isa local government area of the state on Saturday where a search party was able to rescue eight people alive, and a corpse discovered.

“Efforts of the search party, comprising of the local government officials, local divers and SEMA officials, yielded recovery of seven more corpses, while the rest of the bodies are yet to be found due to the water level. This amounted to twenty-two casualties,” he stated.

Seventy-two hours later, bandits invaded four villages, three in Sokoto and one in neighbouring Zamfara, with over one hundred motorcycles at about 3pm, shooting anyone in sight in a daytime massacre.

According to an eyewitness, who is also a victim, the attackers came on more than one hundred motorcycles, carrying two passengers each, with the rider, with sophisticated weapons and killed any villager in sight.

“They neither kidnapped people nor rustled animals, as they used to do; their mission was to kill anybody in sight.

“Our people used to see a white helicopter coming to the suspected hideouts of the bandits deep inside the bush. We suspect it ferries weapons and other things to them, and at the same time, convey some of their victims to secret places,” the eye witness alleged.

But the Police Public Relations Officer of the Sokoto State police command, DSP Cordelia Nwawe, responding to an enquiry from our correspondent, denied knowledge of any form of aircraft landing anywhere within the state, outside the designated airport.

Rather, she stated that the command is doing all within its power to forestall future occurrence of such attack.

“I can confirm to you that right now, two units of mobile policemen had been deployed to the entire area. This is enough to tell you that we are on top of the situation.

“Similarly, one hundred of our personnel are already in Gandi, where the IDPs camp is located,” DSP Nwawe stated.

The affected villages are Alliki, Birwanga, Tabanni Gera in Rabah local government area of Sokoto State, and Kozi viallage in Maradun local government area of Zamfara State. The victims have since been buried at Tabanni Gera village.

LAMENTATION

Save for Shuaibu Atiku and wife, Saratu, who just welcomed a new baby girl to their family, on Wednesday when our correspondent visited, everyone at Gandi Primary School where the displaced villages are camped, had one sad story or lamentation to narrate.

Shuaibu, father of four, momentarily forgot his sad situation and was full of smile when *SATURDAY PUNCH* met him. He narrated how he was able to escape with his entire family to Gandi, when the murderers were attacking Tabani, his village.

“We were lucky not to be at home, but at another village when the news reached us that houses were being razed and people killed aimlessly. With my wife’s condition, we were left with no option but to run for our dear lives until good Samaritans transported us to Gandi with our three children.

“We have decided to name the new baby Aminatu, in gratitude to Allah for preserving our lives to witness her birth”.

Malam Shehu Yusuf, who escaped with a broken skull, is one of the over two hundred farmers who abandoned their farms. He lamented that their forceful relocation would hamper their rainy season farming.

“Now that we do not know when we will return home, most of us who are farmers will suffer serious loss, as our hope of engaging in farming is not sure, may Allah save us from hunger. This attack by the bandits is the beginning of wisdom,” he stated.

Twenty two years old Safiya, who said she could not explain how she escaped with her daughter was in a pensive mood when our correspondent approached her for an interview.

Safiya, in low tone said, “I am yet to come to terms with the news that my husband, a Quranic teacher, who also engaged in farming, is still missing. On that fateful day, he only told me that he wanted to go and inspect the labourers weeding his farm. That was the last I saw of him.

“Let it not be true that my husband has been killed. If not for these same bandits who kidnapped one of his close relatives not too long ago, when he had to contribute a large amount of the ransom they demanded, he could have gone on pilgrimage and perform hajj this year.”

HOW THE ATTACK HAPPENED

The theory that perpetrators of the killings who stormed Tabanni and surrounding villages kill and maim the people are unknown bandits, fell flat in the course of our correspondent's interactions with the victims.

Spokesman for the displaced people, Alhaji Ali Nuru Tabanni, revealed that there was an existing relationship, as the bandits and the villagers were no strangers. They had on several occasions rustled their animals and demanded ransoms, which he said they always paid.”

“The bandits have been terrorising neighbouring Zamfara State, launching operations from their hideout in a forest at Maradun axis of Zamfara State. I have personally lost nine cows and ninety-six sheep to them.

“At a time, they took away 104 cows and demanded a rasom of N600 per cow. We mobilised and contributed the money, but they reneged in releasing our cows.

“This extortion has been going on for long. In recent time, they demanded for the sum of N3m which we negotiated down to N1m. The irony of it is that they always warn and threaten us not to involve the security agencies or else, they would kill us.”

Alhaji Ali Nuru added that it was in the course of one of these negotiations that they killed Tabanni district head, Alhaji Shehu Marafa.

Further investigation by *SATURDAY PUNCH* unearthed another theory why the bandits struck in a ruthless manner.

One of the survivors who confided in our correspondent revealed that over-zealousness on the part of the villagers who took laws into their hands resulted in the revenge mission, where innocent villagers were killed in the gruesome murder. They reportedly killed one of the bandits' errand boys.

The survivor who preferred anonymity explained that, “the bandits who had made the boundary between Zamfara and Sokoto states their hideout, from where they launch attack on Zamfara State,

most times, send their members to Tabanni village to procure some of their needs.

“Our people ran out of patience with the bandits because of their audacity to kill our late district head, Alhaji Shehu Marafa. On the fateful day the gory incident happened, our people accosted one of their errand boys who had come to our village to buy N2000 worth of Masa, a hausa delicacy. When he could not give coherent explanation upon interrogation of what he wanted to do with such amount of purchase, he was mobbed and killed.

“After a long wait and no sign of his return, the bandits sent out a search party that later saw the corpse of the errand boy, with the Masa he bought beside his motorcycle. The search party was enraged with the jungle justice meted out to one of their own, with no one owning up to his death.

“Suddenly, they just invaded our villages, around three o’clock in their large number, on motorcycles, setting our houses on fire and killing anyone in sight in retaliation for the death their errand boy. They didn’t take anything away, but left behind sorrow, tears and blood,” the anonymous survivor narrated.

Sokoto State Governor, Aminu Tambuwal, while addressing the All Progressive Congress governors that came to commiserate with him on the tragedy, which he described as first of its kind, said, “We buried thirty-two people, but when we were leaving the area, they brought additional seven bodies with one severely damaged, which brought the total number of deaths to thirty-nine”.

However, our correspondent saw forty-five names on the list of villagers killed in the daylight murder.

Senators Aliyu Wamakko and Ibrahim Gobir separately donated cash, food items and other relief materials to the survivors at their Gandhi primary school IDPs camp.

PDP National Chairman, Prince Uche Secondus, also stormed Sokoto, to condole with Governor Tambuwal while the state former governor, Alhaji Attahiru Bafarawa, led the pack of individual donors to alleviate the plights of the IDPs, with a cash donation of N10m.

Bafarawa used the opportunity to call on Nigerians not to leave the issue of security to the government alone, but to be vigilant and report any suspicious movement or character to security

operatives.

IMPENDING LOGJAM

A clash of interest is in the offing as the distraught villagers are not contemplating returning to their abode very soon. This is contrary to the expectation of state officials to close the Gandhi IDPs camp soon.

Speaking to *SATURDAY PUNCH* on the expected duration of the camp, DG SEMA, Ibrahim Dyngyadi said, “the camp may not last beyond a month as the villagers are expected to be returning home soon.

“At inception, we had about 10,000 people in the camp, but the population is reducing, an indication that people are leaving the camp”.

The villagers however have a contrary view. Their spokesman, Alhaji Ali Nuru Tabanni, said they are yet to recover from the trauma of the attack and burial of their loved ones.

“If the government would seek our opinion, we would suggest that they provide us with adequate security that will lead us to our village and salvage remnants of our properties, animals and goods. Report reaching us is that the bandits are still lurking around, and we don’t want to take chances.

“No herdsman or farmers could be found in all the villages they attacked. Anyone you see with cows in the bush is among the bandits.

“One good thing about this attack is that it has brought to the open the existence of bandits who are threats to the peace of the country and we expect the government to take a decisive step in ending this menace,” Alhaji Nuru told our correspondent.

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