

RIVERS MAN WHOSE WIFE, SON WERE KILLED BY KIDNAPPERS AFTER RANSOM PAYMENT: I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY THIS CALAMITY BEFELL ME

In this interview with **CHUKWUDI AKASIKE**, 55-year-old Jonathan Ala-Binte narrates how his wife and son, Awontongha and Tarilate respectively, were murdered by kidnappers after they were abducted from their Port Harcourt residence in Rivers State.

How would you describe the events of May 10, 2019 that led to the death of your wife and son?

Normally, I leave the house early in the morning with my son. On that black Friday, my wife, who was a trader, went to Aba, Abia State and my son and I picked her up around 6.30pm on her return to Port Harcourt.

She prepared dinner for us and gave my son his food. He took it to the shop where he and his friend, who is almost like an adopted child of the family, would eat together.

Then my wife brought the food for us to eat. A neighbour who had come over to our house for a discussion was with us. The neighbour and I had stayed together for 16 years in my house. He had grown from a tenant to more or less a family member. Then I heard a big bang.

Was the sound from outside?

No, it came from right inside; where we were seated. We saw some men wielding guns. I didn't know them, but from what I heard, people should not have face-to-face contacts with such armed men. Immediately, I told my wife, son and others to lie face down, to make sure that we didn't make eye contact with them. The armed men asked us for money and I said I would give them the money in the house. They took my two phones and two of them followed me. I brought out the money inside and they grabbed it.

How much was it?

It was about N92,000. As they left, I was shocked and confused. I had heard about armed robbery incidents, but I never experienced anything like that. When I came out of my room, I didn't see my wife, neighbour, and his wife. I began to wonder what was going on. I was about to go down when I heard sporadic gunfire so I lay on my balcony.

After a short while, another man with a gun came and told me to get up and move down. I got up and as I was moving down, he made all sorts of comments.

What kind of comments?

He said someone sent him to kill me. Similar comments were made in my sitting room before I was taken to the ground floor. I raised my hands as I was going down. They used my wife's shop as their entry point. When I got there, I saw people ransacking the shop, grabbing things. I didn't see my son, but the person that was supposed to be with him, was lying face down. They directed me to move outside, and then across to the opposite side of the house. We stayed at a place close to a canal. Then they hit me and I fell down. They ordered me to get up and said I was pretending. They carried me and threw me into their waiting boat.

What about your wife and son?

I saw my son and wife in the boat. My son was lying down at one end and my wife at the other side. I was the third person. It then dawned on me that it was not just armed robbery; it was kidnapping.

Around what time did this happen?

It was around 7.45pm because while I was in the room, I was facing my wall clock. As they were ferrying us away, I said: 'What did we do? I am your fellow Niger Delta man. Where is this coming from?' After saying that, they punched me in my right eye and started beating my wife and son. Few minutes later, one of them said let him go and look for N50m to give us; otherwise he would not see his family again.

I could not even say a word after because people get kidnapped and released. I could not even say - can I go with my wife or my son? A lot of things went through my mind at that point. I thought we would end up negotiating it.

Where did they release you?

They released me at the shore and sped off with my family. It was already dark; there were about five or six of them and almost all of them were armed. I was able to find my way to a road I knew. I only had on a singlet and shorts. I did not have any footwear on; my son also did not have any. When I got close to Road 1, something told me to report to the police first. I went straight to the police checkpoint



Awontongha

Tarilate

and told the policemen there that I was kidnapped with my family and later released to get N50m ransom. While we were talking, I saw an SUV speeding towards Port Harcourt Township side.

Unknown to us, it was my neighbour that was in the vehicle. The policemen said those in the SUV could be the kidnappers. We followed them but could not meet them. Then they told me to make an incident report at the Borokiri Police Station. Then a neighbour came in and told me that Uncle Emma had died.

Who is Uncle Emma?

He was the tenant I said stayed with me for 16 years. I collapsed and they revived me. I could barely stand. The police later took me to the house and to check everything. It was my tenant's wife that they ferried us away. It was when we got to my house that I was told that my neighbour was found between a short fence and a water tank stand. I still wonder why and how they killed him. I didn't even know he was killed until when I was told.

Did the kidnappers later get in touch with you?

They sent an SMS that read 'call us now'. But because of my devastated state, I did not even see it. It was my tenant's wife that said the kidnappers had called. The phone of the boy who was eating with my son on that day was also stolen. It was his phone that they used to call. When I did not respond (to the SMS), they called the boy's father, who then called my late tenant's wife. She told us the kidnappers had called. Then they started negotiation with my in-law.

The negotiation began on May 13, 2019; the incident happened on May 10. An agreement was reached on May 16.

Did you speak with them directly?

No, not me; I was devastated. Even though my in-law was also devastated, he could at least withstand what happened. About 11.30pm (on the day the money was sent), the agreed amount was sent to them in Borokiri. We ask them about my wife and son and they said, 'Dem dey river; nothing happen to them'. We asked how could we pick them up and they said we would be able to pick them up after the payment of the ransom.

The person communicating with us swore to God that they were alive and that my wife even had cold. We didn't know they had already killed them. We waited until 2am and there was no sign of our people. What they did was that immediately after they collected the ransom, they switched off the phones. There was no contact whatsoever from them. Because of some threatening text messages sent to me, we thought we should pay because our interest was in getting our family members back alive.

How do you feel losing two members of your family and being unable to see their bodies?

It is a terrible situation; when somebody dies, you have to pay the person the last respect. I know I am not going to see them again. It is an everlasting sadness; my family is incapacitated. We were four; now, half of them are gone. I have been forced to lead a new life. How am I going to start this new life? I have been married for over 25 years. I am 55 years old. My wife was the sweetest companion I ever had. The fact is that my name is not Job; my name is not David and

I don't have their level of faith.

I have been resorting to sedation because when you wake up in the middle of the night, the thought comes to you. Just like that, we lost three great souls. I am not going to see my golden son and wife again. My super hero is gone; my golden wife is gone. I was a tenant before I became a landlord. Now, I have been forced to become a tenant because I have deserted my house. I don't want the public to know where I stay now. Now, I need answers from God. What is the purpose for which this has befallen me?

We learnt that at a point, the police arrested some of them.

I did not talk to the kidnapper directly because of my state. It was my in-law that got the news and sent it to me. I got to know that the Inspector General of Police team made some arrests. It was stated clearly that they killed them. Otherwise, we would have kept on hoping that we would see my wife and son again.

There is no amount of injustice that my family and I have not suffered on this matter; spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially and otherwise. For me, my focus was to do everything humanly possible to recover them. The effect of the loss has been devastating.

In a poster, it was stated that your late son would have been the best graduating student at the Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti.

Of course, the school acknowledged that. They sent their condolences. He (son) was the Chairman of Society of Petroleum Engineers, Afe Babalola University chapter. He was not just an ordinary boy; he finished primary school with distinction. He was the school prefect in his secondary school. He had high intelligence and leadership skills, right from childhood.

He was the best graduating pupil in computer science in secondary school. Even in the department of petroleum engineering in the university, he was already making waves. His Head of Department, Professor Giwa, spoke to me recently. So, it is unfortunate that some people had to do this to an innocent and promising child.

What are the things you remember about your wife?

She was a virtuous woman. She was not just my wife; she was also my mother. She supported me in every way. All my elder sisters respected her. I was ready to do anything to make sure that the family was happy. Out of two boys, I only have one with me now.

Why did you leave your house after the incident?

My life was under very serious threat. If it were you, would you remain there? That house was built for me and my family and I never imagined that one day, I was going to abandon it. But I have been forced into exile because of the ugly incident. Who was after us? Who masterminded it? Who are the gunmen? Why did they take the lives of my innocent wife and son? Why did they take the life of my innocent tenant and friend of 16 years?

Have you had any serious disagreement with anyone lately?

I find it difficult to answer that question because I leave my house early in the morning and return most of the time in the night. So, where is the time to begin to disagree with people and to achieve what? As human beings, you may have insignificant disagreements. But I am someone who minds his business. To have a disagreement with someone to the extent that the person will kill my family members and my tenant is unheard of.

Do you think the police did their best in the situation?

I wouldn't know because on the day the incident happened, I left there because it was agreed that it was unsafe for me to stay there. Even now, it's almost like I'm living in prison. Each time I remember the incident; I always picture where my wife was seated, where my son was and where I was when the gunmen came in. When those memories come, it is traumatic.

I don't sleep. In fact, it is better these days because initially we didn't know the true situation. We were praying to God for His intervention to secure their release and for them to return alive. If not because of what we later saw, we would still not know anything and hoping for their return till eternity. The heart of man, the Bible says, is desperately wicked. My son did not have any disagreement with anybody. I called him 'Dove'; he always fasted every Sunday and used his stipends to repair instruments in the church.