

Awala Boys: Teenage hoodlums terrorise Lagos community, kill three

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Lagos State Commissioner of Police, Hakeem Odumosu

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Amid lockdown occasioned by the coronavirus pandemic, residents of Aiyetoro community in Ajegunle, in the Ajeromi Ifelodun Local Government Area of Lagos State are living in fear of hoodlums popularly known as *Awala Boys*.

The thugs who belong to different factional groups have reportedly been terrorising residents and passersby since 2018, dispossessing them of phones, cash and other valuables.

Their operations recently led to the death of three persons – a photographer and secretary of a security committee in Aiyetoro, Peter Edogbei, one Daniel aka Warrior and Moshood aka Alegba – while many others, including a traditional ruler (otherwise known as baale), were injured.

Saturday Punch learnt the traditional ruler, Baale of Oke-Ira (also in Ajegunle), Taiwo Olayeni, Edogbeji and other community leaders, were returning from a meeting held at Ajeromi Plaza on Tuesday, March 24, when they ran into the hoodlums on Okoya Bridge, Aiyetoro, around 7pm.

A fight reportedly ensued between two factions of the Awala Boys that day over which group should operate at certain locations in the community.

During the clash, they robbed passersby and attacked them with cutlasses. Edogbeji, 43, died at a hospital the next day from injuries he sustained.

The fight resumed last Sunday when a faction of Awala Boys stormed Tuncarino Street to operate but were resisted. Warrior and Alegba were reportedly killed in the mayhem.

It was gathered that the Awala Boys belong to different cult groups, Eye and Aiye confraternities, which worsen their rivalry.

Chairman, Aiyetoro Community Development Association, Mr Lukman Akande, told our correspondent who visited the neighbourhood on Tuesday that the thugs had become a huge burden to the community.

He said the activities of the gangs festered because the police were initially indifferent to complaints lodged by residents.

He stated, “The major challenge we are facing in Aiyetoro and Ajegunle at large are the hoodlums called Awalas. Before now, when we went to police stations to report them, some policemen would say they were not thieves. That was in 2018. They later graduated to notorious thieves. At times, when they were operating and we reported to the police, they would promise to come but we would not see them until the operation ended.

“On occasions when some of them were arrested, police would insist residents must write statement as witnesses but people were afraid to do so. Eventually, they would be freed and returned to the community.

“They usually operate in groups. They will waylay people on the road around 7pm and collect their phones and other valuables. If they ask for your phone and you don’t give them on time, they will attack you with cutlasses. Some of them carry guns.

“When they enter a street, everyone will start running helter-skelter. Immediately, they collect phones, they will check SIM cards for account numbers of the owners and hack into the accounts.”

Akande explained that the robbers were youths aged between 14 and 20, noting that most of them were not residents.

He said when the attacks became unbearable, landlords and residents came together to seek solutions to the attacks.

“It was in April 2019 when OPMESA came to our aid that we started to have some relief,” he added.

Akande, however, said panic had returned since December when an apprentice vulcaniser identified simply as Farooq and his cousin, Habeeb aka Abere, were killed.

Director General, Aiyetoro Security Committee, Mr Toyin Olusanya, said the gangs’ terrors had become a daily occurrence in the neighbourhood.

He stated that people were afraid to go out early in the morning and return home in the evening.

“They are brutal. Whenever I am returning from office, I will call home to know if it is safe. Many times, my family will tell me to stay back. On Sunday, there was another clash and two persons – Daniel aka Warrior and Moshood aka Alegba were killed. We set up a security group recently but it has yet to commence operation due to financial challenge,” he added.

Farooq’s boss, Yinusa Gbadegesin, said he was killed by a stray bullet on December 28, adding the Senior Secondary School 2 pupil was the only child of his visually-impaired father.

“Those people (Awala Boys) came from Aroworade Street in the morning and I told my apprentices to go home. Farooq was killed by a stray bullet. The following day during a protest, his cousin, Abere, was also killed. Those boys looted shops during clashes,” he said.

A tailor apprentice on Opaleye Street, Ahmed Arowolo, 19, who was a victim in December attacks, said he was in his boss’ shop around 3pm when three Awala gang members struck.

He recalled, “They came in through the canal. My boss was not around. They attacked me with cutlasses and stole two machines. They also collected my phone and fled with N100, 000 that my boss kept in his drawer.”

Chairman Opaleye Landlords/Tenants Association, Mr Lucky Tagbajumi, said the assailants had stripped the community of peace, adding they had broken into several houses and destroyed many vehicles including his.

He said, “We will be happy if the police and OPMESA can be patrolling the community regularly. They should help get those boys of the street so we can have peace. Some of them have been arrested. They should be dealt with. They are not supposed to live in our midst.”

A resident, Rebecca Ozade, said she was walking on the street few months ago when two hoodlums ambushed her and collected her phone.

“They asked me to bring my phone but I refused. They beat me with the side of a cutlass and eventually collected the phone,” she added.

Edogbeji’s elder brother, Henry, described his death as “very painful,” adding that his wedding was to hold in three months’ time.

“He never fought anyone. He was a photographer and a leader in the community. He planned to get married in three months’ time. The introduction was supposed to hold this month,” he added.

The personal assistant to the baale, Taiwo Olayeni, said the hoodlums attacked the traditional ruler after some policemen fled.

He said, “Baale, Edogbeji and I had visited Ajeromi Plaza that day. As we were returning home around 7pm, we met some boys armed with cutlasses on Okoya Bridge. They were robbing and attacking people.

“Some community leaders alerted the police. When they came, we joined them to chase the boys away. We didn’t know that the policemen had retreated. Suddenly, the hoodlums started chasing us. That was when they attacked baale and some other people. By the time OPMESA came, they had escaped.”

The Lagos State Police Public Relations Officer, DSP Bala Elkana had confirmed Edogbeji's death to *The PUNCH*, stating that a manhunt had been launched for the perpetrators.

Elkana stated, "There is a platform created mainly for security and involves people discussing security issues about the Ajeromi community. We have the police on the platform and I am also there to monitor what is going on and usually give suggestions. The youth understand that those committing crimes are young people from the community.

"The youth came together to create tactical approaches to tackling the few young men fomenting trouble in the community. That has helped overtime with the community policing approach and a series of operations carried out there by the police and other sister agencies, including the injured traditional ruler. He has been a strong part of the struggle.

"From a critical perspective, the Awala Boys were members of a gang working together and pursuing their criminal interest before they had issues and split into two groups and became rivals. The two factions started having supremacy clashes and the unfortunate incident happened recently, where our division at Layeni got a distress call that the factions of Awala Boys were attacking each other on the street. The Divisional Police Officer mobilised personnel to the scene."

He said Edogbeji and the traditional ruler were attacked when some community members took on the hoodlums without waiting for the arrival of a police team.

He added, "From the CCTV footage we reviewed, the partners were able to chase the Awala Boys to a distance without knowing that they were in large numbers. The Awala Boys summoned the courage and chased them back and in the process, attacked the man (Edogbeji). He was rushed to hospital, where he died.

"We have analysed the CCTV footage and the injured traditional ruler can recognise some of the hoodlums, who perpetrated the crime. We have launched a manhunt for them in a bid to prosecute them."

Elkana, however, said he was not aware of the two deaths recorded on Sunday.