

FEATURED

Lekki shootings: Army makes a U-turn, appears before Lagos panel Saturday

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FILE: EndSARS protesters at Lekki toll gate before the shootings

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The Nigerian Army, contrary to its decision last week, will appear on Saturday before the Lagos State Panel of Inquiry probing the alleged shooting of #EndSARS peaceful protesters by soldiers on October 20 at the Lekki tollgate.

Sources close to the retired Justice Doris Okuwobi-led panel confirmed to *The PUNCH* on Thursday that the army had acknowledged the panel's invitation and the

panel had fixed Saturday (November 7) for its appearance at the hearing taking place at the Lagos Court of Arbitration, Lekki.

Recall that for two weeks last month, youths calling for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigeria Police protested across the country.

In Lagos, the protests assumed a tragic dimension when soldiers shot protesters at the Lekki tollgate.

The shootings have attracted local and international condemnations with Amnesty International saying that no fewer than 12 people were killed.

Sunday PUNCH on November 1 reported that the Lagos State panel had invited the 81 Division of the Nigerian Army, whose soldiers were alleged to have carried out the shootings.

But the spokesman for the Nigerian Army, 81 Division, Lagos, Major Osoba Olaniyi, said the army would not honour a summons from the panel as the army believed that it was not the panel's "duty" to invite the army.

Olaniyi had stressed that the military would only appear before the panel if it received an invitation directly from the Lagos State Government, rather than the panel.

"If we receive a letter from the state, we will go. Are we not under civil authorities? Are we not part of Nigerians? Have you forgotten that we did not go there (Lekki tollgate) on our own?."

"It is the state government that constituted that panel of inquiry. So, if anybody needs to get in touch with us to come, it is still the state, not the members," Olaniyi had said.

But on Thursday, multiple sources confirmed to *The PUNCH* that the army had changed its position and would be presenting its case before the panel on Saturday.

One of the sources close to the panel, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said, “Contrary to its earlier posture of resistance, the Nigerian Army seems to have bowed to pressure in respect of the invitation to appear before the Lagos panel on SARS. The Army will appear before the panel on Saturday. That is the day the panel has fixed for the Army to appear.

“You know the panel was set up with the approval of the National Executive Council and President Muhammadu Buhari has always assured Nigerians and indeed the international community of full cooperation with the panel, so the Army cannot afford to ignore the invitation from the panel duly signed by its chairperson, who is a judicial officer.

“The whole world is watching us and all eyes are on the panel, especially in respect of the Lekki Tollgate. The Army is critical to the work of the panel and it will erode public confidence in the government if any of its institutions snubs the panel with impunity. After all, the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, so how can the army openly defy the Panel that its own Commander-in-Chief has endorsed?”

The source dismissed the fear that the panel might not be objective since it was set up by the Governor of Lagos State, whom the Army said called for the soldiers who engaged the peaceful protesters at Lekki tollgate.

When contacted on the telephone, the spokesman for 81 Division of the Nigerian Army, Olaniyi, said, “If you have any question, go and meet the panel, don’t come and ask me. The panel is carrying out the investigation, go and meet the panel. I don’t have any comment.”

Further efforts to get Osoba to answer other questions were rebuffed as he hung up the call during the telephone conversation.

How my sister was shot by Abuja policeman, died on NYSC passing-out day – Petitioner

Meanwhile, testifying before the Federal Government's Independent Investigative Panel probing cases of police brutality in Abuja, a petitioner, Miss Chineye Igwetu, on Thursday, broke down in tears as she recounted how her 23-year-old younger sister was allegedly shot by a policeman around Ceddi Plaza in the Central Area of Abuja in July 2018.

Chineye said her sister, Linda Igwetu, was shot by Inspector Benjamin Peters of the Federal Capital Territory Police Command, Abuja, in the night of July 3, 2018.

She said the policeman later claimed that he opened fire on the car conveying the deceased because the driver of the car refused to stop when he was flagged down.

Chineye said the deceased died in her pool of blood the next morning at 6am on July 4, 2018, few hours before the deceased was to pass out from the National Youth Service Corps scheme.

The petitioner, who appeared strong at the beginning of her about-15-minute testimony, lost control of her emotion as she broke down in tears when she started narrating how the deceased died at Garki General Hospital, Abuja, allegedly without being accorded the necessary first aid.

She recalled that her sister was observing her service year at a customer service provider firm, Outsource Global Company in Mabushi, Abuja, as her place of primary assignment.

She said the deceased was living with her and usually resumed work at 1pm and closed at 11pm.

According to her, in the night of July 3, 2018, the day of the incident, Linda was out with two of her colleagues, Tobi Bamidele and Arafat, to celebrate her passing- out from the NYSC scheme which was to take place the following morning.

She said that at about 10.22pm on the fateful day, Linda sent her a WhatsApp message to inform her that she was going out to have some drinks with her colleagues to celebrate her imminent passing out from the NYSC scheme.

She said after waiting on her to return for some time, she slept off but later woke up at about 2am and was surprised to find out that the deceased, who had a spare key to the apartment, had yet to return.

She said, “At about 4.35am, I got a distress call from an unknown number and it was Mr Bamidele Tobi, asking me to come quickly to Garki hospital that something happened on their way home.

“I got to the hospital and was informed that my sister was shot by Inspector Benjamin Peters. Mr Tobi narrated that on their way home, they heard a loud sound and initially thought it was a tyre burst. He said the next thing was that my sister tapped him from the back seat that something hit her below her breast.

“They looked back and found my sister gasping for breath in her pool of blood and that was when they realised that she was hit by a bullet and that the sound they heard was that of a gunshot.

“On their way to Garki hospital, the police stopped them and followed them to the hospital.”

She said her sister kept bleeding at the hospital, but despite her and her friend’s readiness to donate blood to save the deceased’s life, the nurses and doctors said they would not take blood from a woman.

She said she called on her male friends and left for the national blood bank at Zone 4 in Wuse, Abuja, where they were initially told that there was no blood.

She said shortly after she left, a call from the blood bank asked her to return to get some blood.

She added that she was on her way back when one of her male friends who had been to the hospital to donate blood, called her to return to the hospital.

She said she returned to the blood bank all the same, only to later find out that she was being called to return to the hospital earlier because her sister had died.

“My sister passed out at about 6am after she was in a pool of blood without the necessary first aid,” she said.

Asked if she had heard from the police since the incident, she said Inspector Peters who allegedly shot her sister was arrested and interrogated but after some back-and-forth engagements with the police over the matter, the investigative police officer, whom the case was assigned to. stopped answering her calls.

She added that she received a call from the then Senate President, Dr. Bukola Saraki, who later set up a four-man committee of senators to probe the case.

She said, “We kept going back and forth. The hearing went on for about a week. The Inspector-General of Police came. But they kept saying ‘come back today, come back tomorrow,’ until nothing happened again.

“I kept going to the IPO. At some points he stopped answering my calls and I got tired.”

Asked what she wanted from the panel, Chineye said, “I want justice. I want my family to be compensated. I want to see my family smile once again. I want justice for my sister.”

Ogun panel begins sitting, receives 40 petitions

In Ogun State, the Judicial Panel of Investigation set up by the state government on Thursday, began its sitting after receiving no fewer than 40 petitions from victims.

The Chairman of the Panel, Justice Solomon Olugbemi (rtd) while speaking at the inaugural sitting in Abeokuta, said the panel was not out to witch-hunt any security operative, but to ensure equity, fairness and justice for all.

Olugbemi who said the panel was ready to receive more petitions, warned against threat and intimidation of petitioners.

Police, shot and crippled me and prevented hospital from treating me, victim tells Ogun panel

Also on Thursday, a victim of police brutality, Kamol Ganiu, told the state judicial panel of investigation how “unknown” police officers shot him in the leg and crippled him.

Ganiu alleged that the Divisional Police Officer of the Ibara Division refused to produce the officer that fired the shot and also prevented hospital from treating him.

While narrating how the incident happened, Ganiu said after being shot, his mother and brother were detained by a former DPO of Ibara, Bolaji Oluwasegun

The victim said he was shot in the leg by unknown police officers of the state police command attached to the Ibara division on July 17, 2018.

He said he was hit by the police a stray bullet while he was driving at 3am around Ibara area of the state.

Ganiu said, “When I was hit by the bullet, I managed to drive to the hospital for treatment where my mother and my brother were told that they would not treat me without a police report.

“My brother and mother went to Ibara police station to obtain the report but they were detained by the police instead.

“My car was also seized and later released to my family on July 31, 2018 after paying N50,000.

“They accused me of being an armed robber but after several hours of persuasion, they gave them the report, but by the time they got to the hospital my condition had worsened.

“After the incident, I spent one year and two months on the hospital bed. I lost everything during the period.

“Early this year, the police from the command headquarters offered my family N250,000 as a fee to forget about the case but my family rejected it.”

The chairman of the panel adjourned the matter till Monday for further hearing.

Awkuzu SARS killed my husband, asked me to remarry – widow tells panel

In Anambra State, a widow of a victim of SARS, Chidinmma Edozieuno on Thursday told the state judicial panel on police brutality that policemen attached to the unit killed her husband in 2017 and asked her to remarry.

“They told me to give him the last goodbye by kissing him,” she stated.

Edozieuno, who petitioned the panel, asked it to give her reasonable compensation for the loss of her husband and property.

She said her husband, Johnson, was a businessman who was based in Benin Republic but came to Nigeria to visit her and her baby when he was taken away by SARS officials.

She said, “We were in our house in Awka that fateful day in August 2017 when some gunmen broke into our house and took my husband. They also took away our property and told me to go and marry another man that ‘this one is as good as dead.’

“They said my husband was a kidnapper. I did not even know where they came from, and at first, I didn’t even know they were policemen.

“With the help of a friend, who is a police officer, we started looking for my husband. He took me to many police stations to know if they detained him, but he was with none of them. We went to Awkuzu SARS office, and that was where I saw three of the men who came and arrested my husband.

“I hired a lawyer and we went to court. It was in court that the counsel representing SARS told us that my husband was dead. They said he was a kidnapper. I dated my husband for a long time before we got married. He was not a kidnapper. I lived in Benin and that was where we knew each other. I later relocated to Nigeria. My husband was from Aguleri.”

The Chairman of the panel, Justice V.N. Umeh (retd), assured her of justice.

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