

I abandoned my N20m Oyo farm when herders killed eight farmers around me – US returnee

Mrs Olajumoke Awosika is the Chief Executive Officer of Fresh Fields Organic Farms in Ibaayin village, Ibadan, Oyo State. In this interview with KAYODE OYERO, the 57-year-old United States returnee narrates her ordeal in the hands of herdsmen, whose incessant attacks forced her to abandon her N20m farm



could actually make money from it. As a result of that, I decided to get land in our family area in Ibaayin village, since my mother is from Ibadan. I got 10 acres of land there and that was how my journey into full-time farming began.

What year did you return to Nigeria?

I returned home in 2010.

How much money did you invest when you started the farm?

Organic farming is cash intensive. I spent about N4m to get the four hectares of land. It was an outright purchase. I had immersed myself in learning about organic farming. I went for training here in Nigeria, in addition to the training I had back in the US. I discovered that in organic farming, you don't use a bulldozer, you don't use a caterpillar because that will strip and destroy your ecosystem, you will kill the earthworms, you will destroy what they call the uppermost soil and you will be left with another layer of soil which is not as rich as your top soil.

So, I decided that I was not going to use caterpillar. If I was going to use a caterpillar, it would have just cost me about N10,000 to clear each acre of land. That is very easy and cheap but very destructive. So, instead of using caterpillar, I had to hire people to gradually clear the land, with was a virgin land, and get it ready for the planting. I got four workers and paid each of them N300,000 per year. That was N1.2m and it did not include the cost of feeding the workers. Later, we employed over 20 more labourers to join them. In the end, I spent over N7m on clearing the land. After that, I spent N1m to sink an industrial borehole.

So, how much have you invested in the farm in total since you started?

I have spent over N20m, including the cost of the land.

Have you started recouping your investment and making profit from the farm?

Farming is not like buying and selling where after selling a container, you can go back to America or China to import another. It's not like that. The N20m that I have invested so far, it is probably going to take me the rest of my life before I start making profit, probably like 20 years from now. It's a long-term investment; it is my retirement investment but I had to look for something that would give me money in the short term. And that was why I started planting tomatoes, pepper, vegetables which we can still plant in between the trees. But in the next 10 years, we won't be able to plant in between the trees again because by then the hands of our plantain and palm trees would have created shade and nothing will thrive under shade. I pay my workers with money from the short-term crops. I had expected that this year I would break even and start getting money, to

the tune of millions, from the farm, but crisis started and shattered everything.

What really happened that made you abandon your farm and leave Ibadan?

When the Sunday Igboho phenomenon happened and he gave the Fulani herders an ultimatum to leave the Ibarapa axis, we saw a gradual increase in the population of Fulani (in our area), which was unlike anything we had seen in the last five years. Before then, I had never seen one Fulani cow in my axis (Ibaayin) because my farm is remote. When we started seeing them, my farm manager told me about it. He is the head of a task force organised by farmers in the area and he had had many encounters with Fulani herdsmen; he had fought with many of them. When the situation got heated and they (herders) started kidnapping people, I stopped going to the farm alone. I went with my farm manager and he showed me tracks of cows. He later told me they had already invaded nearby farms.

I am the biggest plantain farmer in the area. The first day they (herders) came to the area, they destroyed farms. This was on February 10, 2021. As soon as they (herdsmen) got there, they went into people's farm, harvested their plantains and uprooted cassava for their cows. Those were farms around mine, owned by old men, people in their 60s and 70s and the herdsmen destroyed the farms on a massive scale. The cows ate the crops after which they were marched by the herdsmen to the two main rivers in the village – these were rivers with very clear and clean water that the villagers drank. The herdsmen destroyed the water completely; their cows defaecated and polluted the water. So, the villagers started fetching water from the borehole in my farm.

Do you mean your own farm was spared on that occasion?

Yes, but the only reason they didn't enter into my farm that day was because there were four boys on the farm. They were able to enter into other farms and wreaked havoc because nobody was on those farms.

What was the reaction of the farm owners after the destruction by cows?

The villagers held a meeting. The farmers' task force traced the cows to a certain Fulani man, who had acquired about 200 acres of land in the area. Some villagers around us sold 200 acres of land to that Fulani man. So, the task force discovered it was that Fulani man that freed his cows to graze on other people's farms.

But with 200 acres of land, how can you tell me there is nothing for those cows to eat, so that they had to come outside to destroy people's farms? Of course, it was just sheer wickedness.

So, after that invasion, the affected farmers went to confront this Fulani man and told him to build a ranch for his cows on his land or they would kill his cows but the man did not listen. The second day, the villagers chased the herdsmen out of our village and we were happy, thanking God that that would be the end. But we were wrong. It turned out it was only a prelude to another horror.

What happened thereafter?

On February 27, Fulani men kidnapped the son of a poultry owner in Apete. The vigilantes and the villagers went after them, and the fleeing Fulani people entered Alajaka village and killed eight people; they entered Alajaka village and killed more people, beheaded them and took their heads away. That was the height of it and I said, "I'm done!". I just packed my things and returned to Lagos because my children and everyone in the US had been pressuring me to leave. When I left the farm, I told my workers to leave too because I don't want any of them to get killed by the herdsmen.

Have you or any of your workers gone back to the farm since then?

Gone where! We have left the farm. We abandoned the farm on February 22 when the herdsmen killed eight people around us. It was very close to my farm, it was a walking distance. In fact, last week, my manager told me the herdsmen finally invaded the farm with their cows and fed my plantain to their cows. The plantains were supposed to have been harvested in February; they were worth about N1.5m. It is supposed to be continuous harvest.

Have you reported the incident to the police?

There is no police post in the village; the nearest one is located at Alabata, about three miles to my farm. The police are aware of the killings; the matter was reported but nothing has been done.

As someone who lived for more than 30 years in the US, what impression do you get from these incidents?

We have to tell ourselves the truth, what we have in the South-West is not herders-farmers clashes; no farmer is fighting with the herders, farmers don't have guns. These (herders) are armed militia with sophisticated guns. What the armed Fulani men are trying to achieve is what I don't know. I speak French very well and I listen to the videos of these herders, they are francophone, our borders are wide open for Fulani criminals to come and attack us in Nigeria. It is surprising that Fulani herdsmen publicly carry gun and some governors in the North are telling us that they need the guns to protect their cows. What is the value of a cow compared to the value of a human life? Why can't I, as a farmer, also bear arms to protect myself and my farm? I remember some years ago, the Buhari government said everyone should surrender their arms. We did, but the Fulani never did. It's like they have an agenda. We surrendered our arms and as a farmer, I am now a sitting duck for attackers; I can be killed, I can be raped, I can be kidnapped for ransom.

In America where I lived for over three decades, if I don't have a criminal record, I can bear arms. I can protect my life, it is in the constitution. Even in the Nigerian 1999 Constitution, I have a right to defend myself. If a Fulani man is carrying AK-47, as a farmer I should also be able to carry a gun and stand up to defend myself. If I am licensed to carry a gun, I swear to God, I will arm those boys on my farm. We will not run and we will stand our ground and I will see the Fulani man that will say he wants to kill me on my own land! If the government cannot defend us, we should have a right to defend ourselves. The way forward is self-defence and it is a shame on this government that human life has no value.

Have you applied for licence to bear firearms?

No, I have not and it was because the Buhari government said everybody should turn in their weapons, that it is illegal to have guns as a citizen. Even my farm manager, who used to have a licensed gun, surrendered it because of the new policy. But if the government does not allow us to bear arms, it should allow Amotekun to bear arms.

Do you regret coming back to Nigeria from the US?

Yes, I do and as a matter of fact, I am making plans to go back to the US. I'm done! There is no point because we don't know when the rising insecurity in the country is going to abate. This militia keeps bringing in weapons daily and the government is silent. It is very painful to let go of everything especially with no support from the government.

Do you have friends back in America who were considering returning to Nigeria to go into farming like you?

In fact, I have people that I have already helped to buy farmlands in Ibadan. One is an Ibadan man, who is well-known in Amsterdam; apart from him, there are other people like that in the US. In fact, one of them wanted to go into cow ranching; that is his passion.

Is he Hausa?

No, he is mixed race, my childhood friend. As a matter of fact, I motivate a lot of Nigerians in the diaspora to invest in farming and so, today, whenever they hear of any tragedy, they all call me to check if I am safe. But they are all encouraged to come and farm at home because they always say that if you can do this as a woman, then they can also do it. I've got farmlands for my sisters abroad and at least six others for farming.

By the grace of God, I'm a dual citizen of the United States of America and Nigeria. All my children were born abroad. But no matter how long you stay outside, home is still home; and that was why we came back home'

What is your name and what do you do for a living?

My name is Mrs Olajumoke Awosika. I am 57 years old. I'm an organic farmer, an organic instructor and organic teacher. I've been farming now for five years in Ibaayin village in Ibadan.

What is the size of your farm and what kind of crops do you cultivate?

I have three farms but the one in question is about 10 acres, which is four hectares. I planted plantain mainly but I also have palm trees, ginger, turmeric, am, pineapple, cassava, tomato and pepper on the farm.

What motivated you to venture into farming?

I'm a US-trained caterer. I am a caterer by profession; that was what I was into in America before I came back to Nigeria. I worked at Mobil Restaurant in Houston, Texas. But I took the option of early retirement. When I came back home, to Nigeria, with my husband, we decided to see what we could do. While abroad, we were hearing good things about Nigeria, that Nigeria was getting better. By the grace of God, I'm a dual citizen of the United States of America and Nigeria. All my children were born abroad. But no matter how long you stay outside, home is still home; and that was why we came back home.

When we got back, I discovered that we don't really have organic produce (in Nigeria). I had been diagnosed with high blood pressure and diabetes and I was trying to live a healthier life. So, I was looking for organic produce, which I used to get in the US. But to my surprise, five years ago, that wasn't really available in Nigeria and where we managed to get, it was really expensive. I live in Lagos on three plots of land, so, I started using one plot of land for organic gardening. But with time, we began to get more produce than the family could consume, so, I started looking for market for the organic produce. I soon began to supply upscale supermarkets on the Island. And that was when I discovered my passion and love for organic farming, when I realised that I