

How ESN-trained fighters' security forces threw Imo

CHIDIEBERE OKONOMA

Families of those killed during the clash in Orlu, Imo State, between members of the Eastern Security Network linked with the proscribed Indigenous Peoples of Biafra and soldiers are still mourning their dead. Some of them lost husbands while others lost wives to the bloody incident.

The victims included husband of one Mrs. Bassey Ori from Umahia Okaba in the Orlu Local Government Area and wife of Mr. Paul Anufo from Orlu Oruma Community in the Orlu East Local Government Area of Imo State, two persons from Soko and three other persons from Niger Republic, including a policeman and a World Bank contractor, his driver and two police officers.

Mrs. Anufo's husband was a 43-year-old food seller and among casualties of the January clash. Anufo, popularly known as Nwagwu, by her customers was killed by a stray bullet while she was attending to her customers around 2pm on January 25. For the mother of four, January 25 was her first outing in the year. She died before she could be taken to a hospital.

Her husband, Paul, told our correspondent at his wedding workshop that his wife was hit by a stray bullet while serving people food. He lamented that she was killed while carrying out her business.

He said, "My late wife was with our two grown children at her shop that Monday because we were not sure of school resumption. When the shooting started, she was trying to protect our children and was also serving people food. I was told that my wife was at her shop for the first time this year was hit by a stray bullet. Before I could get to her location, she was already dead. I don't meet alive. I saw her in a pool of her blood when I got to the hospital."

Anufo, left with four children, appealed to well-meaning individuals and the government to assist him take care of his young children. Paul said his wife's remains would be interred on March 28.

Heartrending tales

While Ori and Anufo died of stray bullets, Ori died when caught in the bloody attack. Bassey Ori told our correspondent that her husband was shot dead while avoiding the clash at the popular Basama Junction. Basama Junction is a popular stopover point for travellers coming from Lagos to Oru, Abia and Abia State. They often stop there for food. Ori, left with five young children, described her husband as the breadwinner and a peaceful man.

She stated, "My husband went to a meeting that day. While returning, he saw soldiers were clashing with IPOB members. He then told the commercial motorist driver taking him back to turn back. It was while the rider was reversing that a stray bullet hit him. He bled to death as the bullet hit him in the neck. He was taken to a hospital dead."

The 49-year-old petty trader said that before she could reach the hospital where her husband was rushed to, he had died.

She said, "We never bargained for this. On that day, after eating, he left for the village. It was later in the day that a young man came to my shop and asked if my husband went out. I said yes. He asked me if he was wearing a particular dress and I confirmed it. It was then I became curious and asked him if something was wrong. He then opened up to me that my husband was shot and lying at Basama Junction. Before my children and I could get to the place,



Anufo

Ori and her baby

he had been taken to a hospital. It was a tough task locating where he was taken to."

Requesting help from the government and Nigerians, the widow said that the remains of her husband were still in the morgue because there was no money to bury her.

She said, "There is no money to bury him. I try to open a shop where I sell to my children and I can at least eat. I don't know what the future holds for me. The future looks bleak but with God, government and good Nigerians' help, I can at least train my children and take care of our welfare."

On his part, the Chairman of Nigerians in Imo State, Ibrahim Abdullahi said they lost three of their compatriots to the Orlu crisis. Describing the development as unfortunate, Abdullahi called on the Federal Government to improve the security situation in the country. Abdullahi, who said Orlu was home to most of his kinsmen, said the death of three of his compatriots was unwarranted as his people were not known to cause trouble.

He said, "Most of us have lived in Orlu for a long time. We can attest to the fact that Orlu people are peaceful. That is why we don't see ourselves as strangers. Our people are not in the state for trouble. I thank Orlu leaders for rescuing us. We didn't provoke anything before the violence started. We think the traditional rulers. We don't want this crisis to fester because there is no community in Orlu that is not going to and we are peaceful. We don't want to leave Orlu despite the incitement by some people."

Mrs. Pauline Anufo told our correspondent that the killing of her husband, Paul, a police officer and driver was the saddest day of her life. The mother of one said she spoke to her husband in the morning before he left Benin City for Owerri that day.

She added, "I didn't know that he would be killed the same day. I didn't know that it was his last day on earth. I didn't know that it would be the last time he would speak to me. I would be the last time he would speak to me. I didn't know he wouldn't make it to the house to see me and our daughter."

"He was killed on January 3 when they had entered Imo State. I didn't know what

happened. It was his driver's wife that broke the sad news to me. I can't question God since God that allowed this to happen."

Besides, the wife of 40-year-old police sergeant, Augustine Anyanwu, killed on January 14, was shocked to hear the news of her husband's death.

She said, "Though my husband has been buried but I don't believe he is dead. He was full of life. He was dedicated to his job and eager to get justice for the oppressed. Now that he was killed in active duty, it is expected that the government will come to my aid. I am not asking for too much. I am talking about the welfare of my children and me. He left a young wife. I am young and our children are young too."

Genesis of the crisis

The Orlu-Orsu axis of Imo State had been a flashpoint since November 2020, after the nationwide #EndSARS protests. No sooner had the protests ended than Orlu and Orsu areas formerly known for their peaceful atmosphere turned into a war zone.

The peaceful atmosphere enjoyed by the people of Orlu Local Government Area of the state turned to tension and apprehension after some militants shot and killed four soldiers while six civilians died in the ensuing crisis that drew local and international attention. While the state government tried to nip the situation in the bud, the Federal Government mobilised security forces to the troubled area. For many weeks afterwards, the Inspector-General of Police team was in the state.

From November till now, no fewer than 18 people, including soldiers, policemen and civilians had been killed. On Christmas Eve, two policemen were killed at the boundary between Imo and Anambra states with their operational vehicles set ablaze. A businessman from the Orsu Local Government Area of the state was also killed. He withdrew money from an Automated Teller Machine at Orlu town and gunmen trailed him to a police checkpoint and killed him and two policemen.

Also, hoodlums on January 3, 2021, killed Anufo, his two police escorts and driver. The killings caused panic at the Orlu-Orsu axis.

In a battle between members of the ESN and security agents, Anyanwu was killed on January 14, 2020. The police sergeant, attached to the Quick Intervention Unit of the state police command, was posted to the troubled area. He was killed at his house in the Ikhu Local Government Area of the state in Ikhu.

Some people lost their lives on January 25 when the ESN members and security agents clashed in Orlu town. The clash left four soldiers, some civilians dead and others wounded. The crisis continued till February. The destruction of property, good services and halting of commercial activities during the carnage were unimaginable.

Imo gov't intervention

In a bid to check the situation, the state governor, Hope Udezima, on January 25, 2021, the day the incident happened declared a dusk-to-dawn curfew in 10 out of the 12 local council areas making up Imo West senatorial district.

The security agencies also mobilised more men and equipment in the area including airstrikes in search of the fleeing ESN members said to have struck from a forest in Orsu LGA; a border town to Anambra State.

The governor admitted at different times that he invited the military, including police, airforce and other security agencies to help the state government combat the deadly activities of the ESN members. The governor noted that he had no regrets inviting the military to intervene in the crisis.

On his part, the state Commissioner for justice and Attorney General, Cyprian Akolais, who stated that the state would not allow the ESN takeover Orlu-Orsu areas, added that the government would treat the ESN members as murderers.

He also justified soldiers' takeover of the Orlu-Orsu areas by saying the state government invited them.

Cautions the IPOB leader, Nnamdi Kanu, to stop causing trouble in Igboiland, Akolais noted that the state government would not concede any part of its territory to the ESN.

Prosecution of arrested ESN members
Sunday PUNCH gathered that nine ESN fighters were arraigned at a magistrates' court 16 in Owerri and consequently remanded in Owerri Correctional Centre.

The suspects were arrested in Orlu, Orsu and Orlu Local Government Area of the state. It was further learnt that over 20 ESN members with Biafran insignia were arrested in another operation by a combined team of police and soldiers and rifles recovered.

In another vein, Akolais told our correspondent in Owerri that the ESN members were responsible for the killings in Orlu-Orsu axis and other parts of the state.

A youth axis of the state and Secretary of Orlu/Oruma Youth Assembly, For Wonye, told our correspondent in Imo West senatorial district, Collins Oporozor, said he was unhappy with the approach of the government in handling the matter.

He said, "When Governor Hope Udezima finally addressed Imo people on January 25, 2020, he informed them that he got reports about the activities of militants in Orlu in the afternoon of the same day. In order to arrest the situation, according to him, a curfew became inevitable in the area. He therefore went ahead to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew in 10 out of the 12 LGAs that make up Orlu zone."

"It is pressing to quickly point out two major shortcomings in the governor's reaction, and use them as a point of departure in understanding

bloody clash with families into mourning



Anberine

Augustine

Paul

Moses

the Orlu situation. First, the governor said he heard about the conflagration on January 25.

"Meanwhile, for over two weeks, most members of some communities in Orlu, particularly Umutanze, slept in the bushes during the nights, instead of their homes. Similarly, the overt escalation of hostilities, especially in Oloropo community which the governor said he got to know about on January 25, actually began in the early hours of Friday January 21, the previous week."

"Second, by describing the Orlu situation as militancy, the governor might have unknowingly created a new, wrong narrative that would culminate in the profiling of adult males in Orlu as simple militants. Terrorism, militancy, insurrection and freedom-fighting are all different concepts in political science, and one cannot be confused with the other. It is possible the governor does not get daily security

briefings or that he does not act on them.

"What are the issues? For a long time, IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu, has consistently said that a provision for settlement has been made in Orlu forests for Fulani herdsmen.

He has also continued to allege that the government was mapping out settlement for herdsmen in Orlu. Even though this claim has every likelihood to be false, because sources from Orlu have been unable to corroborate it. Also, the state government has been rather complacent to challenge the misinformation.

"With the belief, or impression, or even delusion that Orlu might serve as a hub of the controversial RUGA programme Kanu allegedly deployed his newly launched Eastern Security Network to the bushes and forests around Orlu to dislodge the herdsmen.

"In one of his broadcasts, Kanu boasted

First, they queried the rationale behind the movement of the police into the bush to disturb them, and why the police, which they alleged have not confronted the killer herdsmen, would choose to go after them (the ESN members) in the bush.

"Days later, reports of further clashes between security agents and men of the ESN began to emerge until January 21, 2021, that soldiers were reported to be in Orlu in search of the corpse of one of their allegedly fallen colleagues. A Church in Oloropo-Orlu said to serve as sanctuary for members of the IPOB and ESN was invaded and some persons reportedly arrested."

"Also, some buildings belonging to the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra were also razed. There was pandemonium. Security agents were shooting

that he was crushing the herdsmen, and he would not reveal further details about the triumphs of his men in the forests. The stage was thus set for violence."

The Orlu indigene noted that a few weeks ago, a police vehicle was attacked by men of the ESN in Orlu.

He added, "The attackers did a video of the scene, showing the vehicle they captured."

everywhere and people scamped for safety. "On January 25, 2021, the increasing presence of security agents in Orlu suggested both restoration of security and looming tension. The latter became the case mid-morning when a convoy of vehicles conveying members of the ESN arrived and engaged the security agents in a gun battle.

"Casualties were recorded. The security agents pulled back. But before then, a fire had razed the Hausa quarters behind the stadium, with unidentified corpses seen in its wake. Heavy shootings continued afterwards. Stray bullets hit innocent persons and some died. Reinforcements continued on both sides until the governor slammed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the area."

According to him, it is important for the government to engage the Orlu situation in a sustainable manner.

He stated, "Curfew, as a temporary measure to defuse tension, may be effective. But it cannot be sustained. First, the situation was never spontaneous. It was never military. It was built up over the months. There was never some threat analyses by the government in the aftermath of the launch of the ESN. Intelligence failure was glaring."

"And the misinformation about RUGA in Orlu was never tackled. Before engaging the ESN in a battle in the bush, security agencies should have been more circumspect."

He said that trained in conventional warfare, the security agents should have known that "guerrilla warfare which the ESN has adopted is never easily won, and in the end, unarmed civilians pay more with their lives."

opinion

Anticipating early completion of Ogun developmental projects

FUNMI BRANCO

It is the consensus of observers of developments in the Gateway State, Ogun, that is gradually becoming a giant construction site. From Abokuta to Epe, and from Iperu to Ijebu-Ode, it's been a season of sturdy, signal projects all along since the Iperu-born prince mounted the saddle on May 29, 2019. Last week, he gave quick timelines for the completion of landmark projects while inspecting the ongoing projects across the state Governor Dapo Abiodun took to Ogun resident by surprise. To say the least, lofty expectations have come to be associated with the administration and the feeling that it is poised to lift the state into a phenomenal level is pervasive.

The 14-lane, state-of-the-art Ijebu Ode-Epe Expressway to be completed by May 2021, together with the loop being constructed to reduce accidents at the road interchange, set to be completed by the third quarter of the year. Confidence is spurred by the rapidly with COVID-19 pandemic, testing and treatment centres sprung up almost at the speed of light.

Quite simply, it is the hallmark of great administrations to walk the talk, or in our local parlance, to 'talk and do' and Abiodun has in fact assumed the sobriquet of 'talk-and-do' governor, an appellation fitting his sincerity.

As he toured the state inspecting project after project, Abiodun felt the love and appreciation of a grateful citizenry. Across various communities, there was palpable excitement as numerous individuals exulted in the fact that development had come to their doorsteps. Abiodun and his team were received with pomp and circumstance. Speaking during an on-the-spot assessment of work done on the loop that would aid the easy movement of road users linking Benin-Ore from the Ijebu Ode-Epe Expressway or linking the Ijebu Ode-Epe Expressway from the Sagamu end, Abiodun averred that the road would further open up the axis to more economic development.

In another development, the governor assured the people that his administration would continue to do all it can to make movement of people and goods easy across the state. This time round, he was

on a visit to Ejirin Road in Ijebu-Ode to assess the level of work done. The asphaltting of the road, he remarked, would make movement easy around the city, calling on the people to continue to support his administration's quest to make movement on roads across the state seamless and this week, the governor further indicated that his administration would complete the ongoing construction of a flyover across the Sagamu-Ore-Benin Expressway linking Ijebu-Ode to the Epe Road. It is a given that when completed, it would ease vehicular movement and reduce accidents for commuters travelling from the eastern part of the country to Lagos and those transiting to Sagamu and Ijebu-Ode.

Significantly, and as Abiodun himself pointed out, the completion of the flyover would decongest the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. In addition, it is bound to enhance the industrialisation of the state while increasing the commercial value of the area. The governor said, "The construction of this road, which started in February of last year, ought to have been completed before now, but for the global pandemic and

lockdown. I can assure you that with the way contractors handling this project are going, the road will be delivered as scheduled." The road, one of Abiodun's legacy projects, will serve as an impetus for Ogun State's economic growth as well as industrial cluster equipped with agro, communications and education cities, among others. This is, of course, not the place to dwell on the governor's road revolution, but it suffices to say that the roads and crannies are opening up for countless numbers of people to advance their economic fortunes.

In this regard, it may be noted that while inspecting the 150-unit housing scheme in the Sagamu Local Government Area, Abiodun reiterated his commitment to provide affordable housing units for the people of the state. As he noted, the government is poised to reduce the accommodation deficit in the state through massive construction of affordable housing units in all its three senatorial districts, and the two and three-bedroom bungalows would be sold at affordable prices to the people of the state, adding that his administration would deliver 2,500 housing units in the next

two years. As a matter of fact, in line with the housing blueprint of his administration, the social housing scheme that took off in separate locations across Abokuta, the state capital, is now being extended to other locations for equal accessibility. At the moment, land clearing has reached an advanced stage in Oru and Ilaro. The project in Sagamu is scheduled to deliver 200 housing units, with 100 units delivered in the ongoing first phase and the other 100 in the second phase. The Affordable Housing Estate, located opposite the NYSC Camp, Sagamu. On the other hand, the 200-unit Ota estate will also be constructed in two phases of 100 units each inside the existing Government Reservation Area in Ota. That is not all: the Ilaro estate comprises 100 housing units to be delivered in two phases. The site being along the General Hospital road.

These are not white elephants: they are projects rooted in developmental prudence. Much more is ongoing in Ogun State that what has been noted here, but the point cannot be missed that prudent management of resources, insistence of value for money and, above all, vision in governance will guarantee multiple developmental returns. Consequently, life more abundant for the people even in perilous times like the moment when the pandemic is still hobbling the economies and finances of different national and sub-national governments around the globe.

Branco sent this piece via funmi@punch.com