

panorama

Buffeted by rising insecurity, Imo residents contend with rights abuses, killings by security agents

CHIDIEBUBE OKEOMA
captures the feelings of Imo State residents over cases of extrajudicial killings, rights abuses and harassment by security operatives

OWERRI, the Imo State capital, which was once renowned for its peaceful nature, has lately become a theatre of war. While security operatives have been battling gunmen, who have launched vicious attacks on no fewer than 15 divisional police headquarters, the state police command headquarters, the Correctional Centre in Owerri, military checkpoints, two offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission and others, cases of extrajudicial killings, human rights abuses and citizen intimidation by the military have reached astronomical heights as a result.

Our correspondent reports that in the last two months, many residents have been killed extrajudicially in the state.

① Fresh in the minds of the people was the killing of a 200-level student of the Imo State University, Owerri, Divine Nwaneri, allegedly by soldiers keeping guard in front of the Imo State Government House.

Nwaneri, 23, who hailed from the Obollo community in the Isiala Mbano Local Government Area of the state, was rushed to the Federal Medical Centre, Owerri, where she was pronounced dead.

② The next day, a farmer, whose identity could not be ascertained, was allegedly shot in front of the Government House by security operatives. Residents of the city woke up to the ugly scene of the man's corpse lying in his car.

③ A woman, Mrs Chikaodi Ofoegbu, was also hit by a stray bullet from one of the guns of soldiers, who were in jubilation at a military checkpoint in Ezama-Obiato on the Onitsha-Owerri Expressway. The mother of four died before she could be rushed to hospital.

Her husband, Benjamin Ofoegbu, a panel beater, told our correspondent that soldiers, who visited him, only told him to make a formal complaint at the Nworieubi Divisional Police Headquarters, which he said he did.

④ As if that was not enough, military men who mounted a checkpoint on the Owerri-Orlu Road allegedly shot dead a businessman, Noel Chighu.

Noel, a native of the Ngor Okpala Local Government Area of the state, was shot in his new car on the day he took delivery of it on the excuse that he violated a military checkpoint rule.

His corpse was dumped in the morgue of the Federal Medical Centre, Owerri, while his car, bunch of keys and money were brought to the state police command headquarters and handed over to the then Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of Operations.

The widow, Chidinma, told our correspondent that Noel was intentionally killed by the military men, who were supposed to protect him.

While calling on the authorities to bring the killers to justice, the woman, who was four months pregnant as of the time her husband was killed, said Noel's blood was crying for justice.

⑤ On May 31, Nigerian Air Force personnel at the tollgate of the Sam Mbakwe International Cargo Airport, Owerri, allegedly shot dead a Germany-based Nigerian, Oguchi Unachukwu.

Oguchi, who was rushing to catch a flight to Lagos from where he was to connect another flight to Hamburg, Germany, was killed in the presence of his wife, two-year-old son and four-month-old daughter, who were seeing him off to the airport.

His wife, Ijeoma, told our correspondent in an emotion-laden voice that the Air Force men killed her husband without provocation.

Asking the world to help get secure to justice, the distraught 32-year-old woman accused the Air Force personnel of destroying her three-year-old marriage.

⑥ Three persons, made up of two female traders and an artisan, Matthew Opara, were killed by stray bullets as gunmen battled security operatives in a gun battle.

Matthew's elder brother, Chris, accused the military of intentionally killing him. He later told journalists that the 34 Artillery Brigade Command of the Nigerian Army, Obinze, Owerri, invited him over and apologised to him over the death of his brother.

⑦ Also, an officer of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, Glory Nkwocha, was felled by a stray bullet in Orlu during a gun battle between joint security operatives and hoodlums in the state.

There are also cases of human rights abuses and harassment by security agents in the state.

For example, there was the indiscriminate arrest and clamping into the Owerri Correctional Centre of 107 youths on the allegation that they were planning to overthrow the governments of the President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (ret.) and the state governor, Hope Uzodinma.

The youths were arrested randomly in different parts of the state, a development that generated public outcry.

Also, there is a grave allegation of corpses littering the morgue of the FMC, Owerri, a development that the Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri, Most Revd. Anthony Obinna, decried, saying that he was at the hospital's morgue to see 35 corpses for himself.

The prelate also disclosed that he was at the Owerri Correctional Centre to see the 107 youths unjustly being held.

In a statement titled: 'Stop the killings, convolve a ceasefire meeting, save Imo State; A charge to Governor Hope Uzodinma and all stakeholders', Archbishop Obinna said, 'Last year, exactly about this time, I charged Governor Hope Uzodinma and other Igbo leaders to protect our people and defend our land. That charge was provoked by threats and acts of invasion of our farmlands by Fulani herdsmen.'

'Now, our very lives are at stake, as killings of Imo people are taking place in broad daylight and at night by both officially and unofficially armed men. Imo people are on the run from known and unknown gunmen.'

'There is fear in the air and anxiety on the ground. Imo people are hiding, living in fear. Reports of indiscriminate arrests for no clear reasons and killings, as a show of power or in alleged retaliation, continue to spread.'

'On Wednesday, May 26, 2021, I personally went to the Federal

Correctional Centre, Owerri, to see the 106 young men arrested from various locations, accused and charged jointly, for planning to commit a felony.

'They are yet to be released.'

'On Thursday, June 3, 2021, I visited the Owerri Federal Medical Centre mortuary. As I painfully surveyed the 35 corpses, stark naked on the bare floor, stealthily dumped there within the last few days, victims of runaway killers, military, police and unknown gunmen, with no identification on them, I thought of many others, who have been kidnapped, taken to unknown locations, killed and even butchered, as we continue to hear. Imo is bleeding.'

'On behalf of the already killed and even more; on behalf of the living, now threatened daily with brutal death, I charge Governor Hope Uzodinma, as the Chief Security Officer for Imo people, to step up and stop the killings by whoever is responsible for them. I equally charge all users and abusers of guns and deadly weapons to stop the killings, to renounce violence and to denounce any show of pride in killing fellow human beings.'

A human rights activist, Jones Omwusonyia, asked the government to deploy more strategies in fighting crimes in the state.

He stated, 'Nothing bolsters the ranks of criminal dissidents more than when they are able to secure the sympathy of the masses. This doesn't mean that these criminals will ever serve the interest of the common people in any way better than the state will, but the people, when betrayed by the state, are mostly forced into aligning with dissidents.'

This is why the security agencies in more organised and better-governed climes, will always deploy strategies that are civilian-friendly, while being effective in combating criminal elements. Most times, you see the military engaging in some people-oriented activities, like medical outreach, distribution of aid materials to the populace and even helping to rebuild communities devastated by dissidents.

'Imo is facing a situation that requires very careful yet decisive action to dislodge the dissidents and their criminal enablers, and secure the confidence of the populace. Unfortunately, both the governor and the security agents are acting in ways that can dangerously inflate the capacity and popularity of the dissidents through their antagonistic strategies towards the innocent masses.'

'There are credible allegations that the police are engaging in random arrests of innocent citizens and arbitrarily labelling them as criminals and insurgents, while the real criminals seem to be enjoying a free ride around town, as we still witness pockets of violence in some parts of the state, especially, in the capital city of Owerri.'

'The governor, on his part, has failed woefully in winning over the Imo populace. This crisis provides a grand opportunity for the governor, still seen by most people as an impostor on the seat of Imo governorship, to redeem his image with the people by showing the right leadership. This leadership should be shown through inspiring speeches, not empty boasts that are almost always rendered a lie.'

'The governor would have won over the support of the people by showing genuine empathy and making the people own the fight against this incipient terrorism against the state, but he sounds and stays aloof most of the time. He talks like someone who is aware that the people do not welcome him as their leader, hence, his constant recourse to utterances that may be interpreted as threats against the people. If the governor had been talking like a father from the outset of this crisis, I believe, by now, things, if they haven't returned to absolute normality, would have profoundly improved.'

'One of the immediate dangers with lack of timely and effective communication is that the real criminals, who the police should be supported to deal with, will inadvertently benefit from the distrust against the police. But when the police come out timely with convincing facts about those in their custody, the people will be equipped with the right information and the chances of embracing extremism will be less.'

'It should worry us that a governor, who hastily organised a purported stakeholders' meeting to generate support for his legally stalled probe against his predecessor, has not deemed it fit to convolve a security summit, where every stakeholder in the state will be invited to lend their voice against the activities of these hoodlums.'

'By failing to openly warn the police and other security agencies against any form of abuse against Imo people, the governor has cast himself as an oppressor of the people. One can imagine the huge public relations capital the government would have generated to itself if the governor had made a public statement condemning arbitrary arrest of Imo citizens and warning the police to desist from any abusive actions against the masses.'

The state Commissioner of Police, Abutu Yaro, said there were no facts that there were cases of extrajudicial killings in the state.

Yaro reminded the people that security operatives were Nigerians, who deserved the support of fellow compatriots. ..