

TUESDAY, July 26, 2022, which started on a bright day for the Igwes sadly ended on a gloomy note. That day, Sandra Igwe was thrown into despair as her husband, Igwe, a worker with Sterling Bank Plc, was shot dead during an attack by robbers while escorting a bullion van from his office at Abu, Abia State to Umuahia, the state capital.

The attack occurred at Ntigha Junction, Port Harcourt-Enugu Expressway, in the Isiala Ngwa North Local Government Area of the state.

A brother to the deceased, Mr Ifeanyi Igwe, told *Sunday PUNCH* that he was surprised to receive a phone call from one of his brother's work colleagues identified only as David at about 5:26pm on that day.

Ifeanyi noted that he had a bit of premonition that all was not well and decided to go to the bank after receiving the call. After confirmation from another colleague of his brother and his mum, who discouraged him, he nonetheless decided to show up at the bank. His unease, he noted, prompted him to call his brother several times on his mobile but his phone rang out.

He said, "My brother hardly delayed in taking his calls. When I couldn't reach him, I became more uneasy. I was delayed for over one hour and 30 minutes in the bank. The employee attending to me told me to wait until the manager got back as he was on his way from Umuahia. I got furious that I had to be delayed without a piece of tangible information. It was then I was told my brother was arrested and taken to a police station in Umuahia which they refused to disclose."

Ifeanyi said at that point he envisaged that it was a fraud case. But unknown to him, his brother had been killed by robbers. "One of the bank's staff walked up to me and advised me to seek the help of a spiritualist on the issue and I was dumbfounded at the connection between the arrest and what I was advised to do," he stated.

He further said that he later became anxious and paced around the banking hall, adding that he noticed that the staff on duty wore gloomy faces and he had to call his father to come over to the bank as he was drowned in a state of confusion.

I can't train our kids alone

—Wife of slain banker

BLESSING AFOLABI



The late Igwe with his wife

He said, "When my dad came, he was told the same thing and we were asked to return the next day when the manager would have been back. My dad was a bit calm but I wasn't. I started calling the cops I knew who could be of help before we found out my brother had been shot. I am in pain. If the bank had informed us on time about the incident, maybe we would have handled the situation better."

Speaking to the late bank worker's wife, Sandra, she could barely hold her tears.

She noted that she was

devastated when she heard news of her husband's death.

She added that she was unaware that her husband was drafted to accompany cash movement to one of the branches at Umuahia.

She further said that she didn't get first-hand information on the development.

Sandra said, "We planned to train our two children up to master's level and now this unfortunate incident surfaced. I don't know how I'll fend for the children alone. I expect that Sterling bank will take over the training of our children to the level my late husband and I planned to and provide adequate compensation for our upkeep, considering that he lost his life while on active duty."

A friend of the deceased, identified only as Paschal, told *Sunday PUNCH* that some of the bank workers visited on Thursday, July 28, to confirm the incident.

He said, "My concern is for the bank to take up the welfare of the children left behind because the deed has been done. He is a young man who left a three-year-old and four-month-old baby."

Another friend of the deceased, Cynthia Nwosu, told *Sunday PUNCH* that she had yet to come to terms with the death of her friend. She noted that the late Igwe and one of his colleagues usually did comedy skits with her, adding that they did about five to six skits together on the Monday before his death.

Nwosu said, "When we finished shooting the skits, we left the location together because the bank was

already calling him as he was recently posted to be in charge of the automated teller machine. He had to alight on the way to report to the bank."

She added that she was at her workplace on the said date when she received a call from one of their friends and colleague, Emeka, about the incident and she abruptly ended the call.

She said, "He called back and told me he couldn't joke about it. He told me Igwe was attacked by robbers in the bullion van and that the robbers went into the bus where the van drove into and shot him."

She further told our correspondent that she couldn't put the story together because it felt incomplete. "The driver was said to have escaped, why didn't Igwe escape? If it were a stray bullet I will understand but his death is a mystery. I know there must be casualties during a robbery attack but why must it be Igwe that was the casualty? He was unarmed," she stated.

Lawyer, security expert comment

In his comment on the issue, a human rights lawyer, Festus Ogun, said that the late bank worker's family members were entitled to some compensation.

He stated that upon the death of an employee, the named beneficiary, usually a family member, shall be paid the group life insurance policy maintained under Section 4(5) of the Pension Reform Act, 2014.

The lawyer stated that given the fatal circumstance of the death of the employee, he believed that the employers would adequately settle the family and not allow the matter to escalate. Ogun added, "They are obligated by law and morality to in fact facilitate the process."

Stating his position on the matter, a security expert, Dr Tony Ofoyetan, stated that every commercial bank should have an insurance policy for all staff members that accompanied bullion van especially because of the enormous risk attached to such ventures.

He stated that the policy of 'need to know' must be applied when it concerned the movement of cash.

"When everyone in the bank knows the direction and location of cash movement then there will be a breach in intelligence that would have been applied to the movement of such cash in transit."

"Also, bullion vans are expected to be bulletproof vehicles. It's only in this part of the world we operate this way. Cash-in-transit vehicles should be armoured vehicles," he said.

He added that an employee who accompanied bullion vans with cash should be sandwiched

and not exposed to any danger, adding that they shouldn't become casualties for any reason. He advised that those employees should not sit in front of the vehicles and if possible, be given bullet-proof vests for protection the same way boat commuters were given lifejackets.

The security expert said, "The security agencies are tasked to protect the money and protect the bank workers too. This is the principle and the right way to protect lives and property."

He advised that those who operated/drove bullion vans must be licensed such that they understood the nitty-gritty of defensive driving when connected with the movement of cash-in-transit.

Bank's reaction

Reacting to the issue, Head, Corporate and Investment Banking Marketing, Sterling Bank Plc, Mr Ademola Adesina, noted that the bank was aware of the incident and currently in touch with the deceased's family to effect its bereavement policy and compensate them in line with the recommendations.

Adesina, in a statement sent to our correspondent, stated, "The bank received, with a heavy heart, the sad news of the death of our employee, Mr Igwe, in an unfortunate incident in Abia. Mr Igwe was an integral part of our operations in the region, and his passing is a deep loss to us. Sterling bank has been in contact with his family since the unfortunate event, paying a condolence visit and offering our sympathies to the family. In addition, the bank has committed to supporting the family in fulfilling the burial rites in accordance with the customs of the region and has also taken steps to ensure the education of the children of the deceased with the setup of education trusts."

Earlier, the state police command noted that a bullion van robber was shot dead at Ntigha Junction, Port Harcourt-Enugu Expressway, in the Isiala Ngwa North LGA of the state.

The state police spokesperson, Geoffrey Ogbonna, in a statement, said the incident happened around 1:13pm.

He said that six mobile policemen attached to the 28 PMF Umuahia and Counter Terrorist Unit, Base 4, Aba, while escorting a bullion van conveying cash from one new generation commercial bank in Aba to Umuahia, suddenly ran into a blockade/ambush mounted by armed robbers. Ogbonna stated, "The armed robbers opened fire on the bullion van, which forced its driver to swerve into the bush where the bank cash officer was shot dead by the hoodlums, while the driver escaped. During the gun duel that ensued between the police escorts and the hoodlums, one of the hoodlums was neutralised and his AK-47 rifle, with ammunition-laden three magazines strapped together, was recovered."