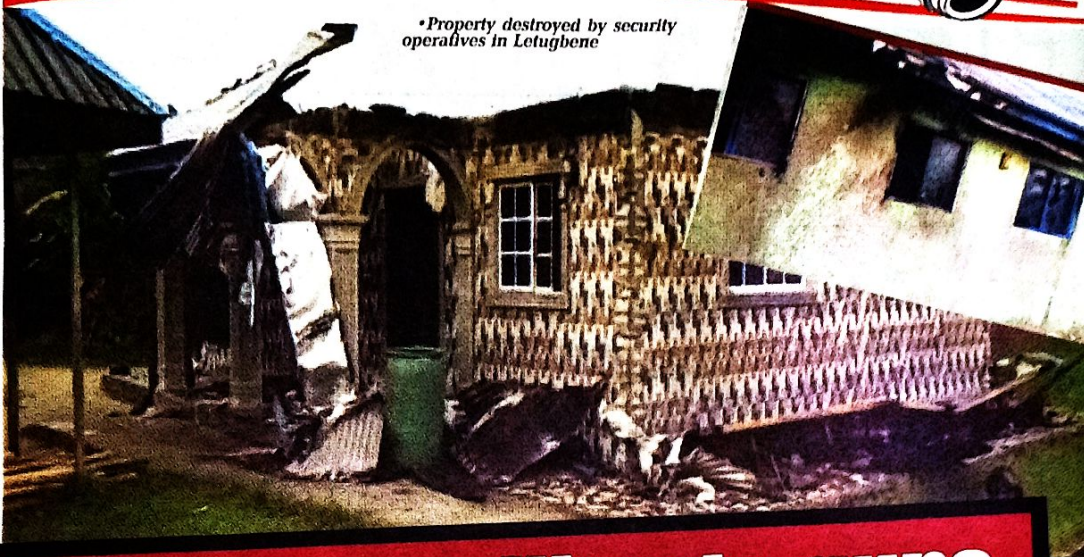


The South South LENS

•Property destroyed by security operatives in Letugbene



the community, they just come spend a few hours, and move out just like that. That is why we are pleading with the state government and security agencies to come to our rescue so that we, the innocent people, live peacefully in our community," he added.

Our appeal for security post ignored —Resident

A disturbed indigene of the area, Sally Ebiowei (not real name) said their plea to have a military presence in the area dated back to 2018 because of the activities of sea pirates, along the usually busy waterways.

He recalled how two years ago, in February 2020, when suspected sea pirates ambushed and killed four soldiers escorting a tugboat conveying drilling equipment for a multinational firm along the waterways, close to Letugbene, prompting the military to invade the community in search of the alleged killers, who incidentally, he claimed, they (the natives) were also victims of their escapades.

This, according to him, prompted the community to make repeated appeals to the authorities to no avail of the need to establish a military post in the area. Because of its strategic location, Letugbene is the gateway to communities in the Southern Ijaw council area of Bayelsa, Rivers, the Atlantic Ocean, and even Delta State and a corridor for both good and criminal elements plying the route.

He asserted, "If there were a military post presence at Letugbene as demanded, miscreants would not have seized control of the area and unleashed a reign of terror on our people and other travelers along the waterways."

Okaba decries military invasion

INC President, Okaba, flanked by the Chairman of Ijaw Youth Council, IYC, Central Zone, Clever Inodu, said: "The first thing to say is that there is nowhere in the world that houses of people have to be brought down because the military is looking for their stolen weapons. Where else, apart from Ijaw land, do we have stories of communities being burnt down because militants in those areas operated or killed military personnel? Burning down an entire community because you are looking for guns is unacceptable and for us is very provocative."

"In Nigeria today, it is a daily occurrence in the North East, South East, and elsewhere, terrorists are invading everywhere. Our appeal this time to the Chief of Defence Staff is to direct the military officers that are deployed to Letugbene community to be professional and disciplined in their responsibility of maintaining peace and order."

"We want to appeal to the Bayelsa state government to inaugurate a Commission of Inquiry that will investigate the remote and immediate causes of the recent attack and whoever that is culpable, whether from Letugbene community or elsewhere, make sure they take measures."

"Meanwhile, we shall escalate your demands for relief materials and appeal to the state government to set up an IDP camp so that relief materials and some measures to improve the suffering of the people."

"We are not in any way encouraging criminality, but the entire community cannot be kidnappers or criminals. The military should gather intelligence and go after the people responsible, not destroy an entire community because some people in that community were involved in a criminal act. This does not happen in the North or East or elsewhere, except in Ijaw nation, what have we done to this country?"

No official protest—PPRO

An official of the state government told Saturday Vanguard that the state Commissioner of Police, Ben Okolo, was handling the community matter.

However, when contacted, he (CP) referred one of our reporters to the Police Public Relations Officer, PPRO, of the Command, SP Asinim Butswat, who said that the community has made no formal complaint to the police.

Handover militants, guns, Bayelsa tells troubled Letugbene community

• It's impossible—Chief Lamaleti, secretary, Letugbene Council of Chiefs
• Militants kill villager over leaked plan to surrender suspected militant—Pou, youth president

By Emma Amaize, Regional Editor,
South-South, Samuel Oyadongha &
Emem Idio, Yenagoa

HOW were militants able to overrun Letugbene, an oil community, in Ekeremor Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, and forced a reign of terror on the villagers since 2020?

How was it possible for hooligans to chase the traditional ruler, HRH Roman Darebebe, and other indigenes out of the town?

Where were the Bayelsa State Government and the legion of security agencies, including the Police?

Why did the people not raise the alarm and report the matter to relevant authorities?

So many questions begging for an answer when people got to know that militants, including oil bunkers, sea pirates, and kidnappers, in fact, established a parallel government in the community.

The unbelievable affair became known, only last month, when the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta, on a separate search mission for militants that kidnapped Navy officials, early this year, in Rivers state, stormed the creek community for the rifles hijacked from the security operatives.

Leaders of Letugbene community, who visited the President of Ijaw National Congress, INC, Prof Benjamin Okaba, Monday, at Yenagoa, over the matter, dismissed the insinuation that they alerted neither the Bayelsa government nor security agencies in the state.

Hell in the hands of militants

Permanent Secretary, Letugbene Council of Chiefs, who led the delegation, Chief Raphael Lamaleti, said the Bayelsa State Government disappointed the community with its response and approach to the ugly episode, especially the crisis between the community and military authorities.

Speaking on how militants took over the community, he revealed, "Sometime in 2001, we lost a brother. During the time of his burial, he is the uncle of these militants, they came for the burial although his parents are from Letugbene but not living in the community and do not have a house. After the burial of their uncle, they stayed behind and that was the beginning of militancy in the community."

"I want to tell you that Letugbene community has been passing through hell in the hands of the militants. Actually, their continued stay in the comments did not augur well for the community."

Sometime, this year, we drove them away and equally locked the Women Development Centre built by the Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC, for out the community because that is where they stayed after the burial. That was what we did because we do not take part in what they are doing.

It is untrue that we did not lodge a complaint

"People say that the leadership has not made it public, it is not true and we have written several letters from 2017. I want to tell you that Letugbene community has been passing through hell even in the hands of the militants and military. I can vividly pinpoint that the militants took away 12 speedboats from Letugbene community."

"We have been suffering in the hands of the militants and military. The state government said we should hold the militants with our bare hands and we cannot do that. We are crying to the world to come to our aid to free us from this mess."

"We wrote and applied for a military houseboat, I went to Area Command in Ekeremor. In all the letters, we have been writing since 2017, we requested they provide the community with a military houseboat."

Our plight disregarded

"The last time we met with the Special Assistant, SA, Security to the Bayelsa State Government, he said the state government cannot incur the expenses of a military houseboat."

"Then we say okay come with another option, we have accommodation for the military, let them come and guide the place."

"Severally, we have been crying to the federal government, Defence Headquarters, and our state government."

In 2018, the military invaded the community on two occasions, and houses were burnt and valuable properties destroyed.

"We have written a series of letters complaining and crying to the government."

"Luckily, last week Tuesday, they called us to meet the Special Assistant on Security to the Governor. They said they invited us because of the letter we wrote crying for relief materials."

They now told us that the military power is from the federal government, that the state government does not have authority or power to stop the military, and that they can advise us we should try our best, get hold of the militants, and submit their guns, which we cannot."

"But in the time of elections, they will come to us and beg us to cast our votes for them. Now that they have emerged and we are crying to them to salvage us, they are now telling us that the power is beyond their capacity, and they cannot help the people of Letugbene community."

"We went home to report to our fathers that even our state government cannot help us," he said

Deserted

Chief Lamaleti also explained: "Because of the invasion and constant threats from the military that they will come back, the community is now deserted. Some of our people are taking refuge in the neighboring communities of Obotobor, Aghoro 1&2 Agge, Amatu 1 & 2, Ezetu Bilabiri 1&2, among others."

Militants kill native —Pou, youth president

Youth president, Mr. Pou Pou, told Saturday Vanguard: "We, the youths, have put more efforts to make sure that the militants, which the military are hunting for are not in our community. We cannot hand over militants to the military because, in a situation whereby you attempt to hold the militants who are with weapons, you may waste your life."

"Some time ago, when we attempted to get hold of the militants, we lost one of our indigenes. We had wanted to hand over a militant to the military and along the line, information leaked, the militants came to the community and started shooting and along the line, we lost our brother. With that experience, we are afraid to hold and hand over militants to the military."

Do not live here

"You cannot see the militants living in