## feature



## How we lost our loved ones



GODFREY GEORGE tells the stories of casualties of the just-concluded general elections

The sun has stopped to shine on the household of a chartered surveyor and former Caretaker Chairman of the ruling All Progressives Congress in Ward Lo, Ahoada West, Rivers State, Chief Chiosom Lennard.

Lennard's life was cut short by gunmen, who abducted and killed him in cold blood on March 18, 2023, the day Nigeria held its governorship and House of Assembly elections.

Lennard was counting down to his next birthday on April 23 when he was killed.

Lennard was counting down to his next birthday on April 23 when he was killed. His PhD defence at the Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, according to one of his close associates, Mr Prankic Code, was scheduled for Thursday, March 23. He was gruesomely murdered for struggling with hoodlums who stormed his polling unit to disrupt the poll by snatching the ballot boxes.

"His wife just gave birth. The child is only 21 days old. She is still in shock at how a man she saw that morning was brought back, wrapped in bloodied wrappers for simply going out to exercise his right to vote.

"He is the only child of his parents. His mother died in 2019. This is a devastating tragedy, not just for his family, but also for us as a people who see him as the proof his father ever lived," a community leader, who simply identified himself as Chinda, told our correspondent.

Eyewitnesses, who spoke to Saturday PUNCH, alleged that the gunmen were

Eyewitnesses, who spoke to Saturday PUNCH, alleged that the gunmen were

dressed in police uniform.

The incident happened while voting was ongoing at the Ubeta Community Primary School, Ibagwa Polling Unit Two, Ward 10 in Ahoada West Local

Government Area.

"He (Lennard) asked the policemen, who came in with a van to tell him why they would want to take the bailot boxes and electioneering materials away. They told

would want to take the ballot boxes and electioneering materials away. They told him to stand aside or get shot. 
"He went in to call other APC agents who came out to confront the policemen to show them their identity cards. Before we knew what was happening, right before our eyes, they dragged him along with them, after they shot the other two complainants dead on the spot.

"Commotion set in and before we knew what was happening, the so-called policemen had shot Lennard multiple times. He bled till he died.
"All researe attempts to resuscitate him failed as he had lost much blood," an eyewitness, Mr Chude Muoka, said.

Another resident, Pere Omoni, who claimed to have witnessed the attack, said Lennard fought to stay alive.

Another resident, Pere Omoni, who claimed to have witnessed the attack, said Lennard fought to stay alive.

"We were the ones who carried and set him on a slab and were pouring water on him, applying pressure on the open bullet wounds but there was no way we could save him at all. The wounds were all over and he had bled profusely.

"His pupils were flipping and we knew he was not going to make it, but what do we do?" There was nothing we could have done. They shot that man (Lennard) multiple times just because he wanted to defend his rights," Omoni stated.

A community leader, who did not want his name in print for fear of being attacked, confirmed that two others were shot by the fake policemen.

"They shot two other APC chiefinia in the area, Young men in their primes were shot dead inside the community primary school because of someone's selfish authors. As a community, we are still in abock, the source added.

When contacted, Lennard's wife confirmed her husband's death but declined to speak further.

speak further.

ear naturer. "I sin heartbroken. They killed my husband," she simply said and sobbed all through till the line went dead

The Commissioner of Police in charge of election duties in Rivers State, Mr. Echeng Echeng, was said to have ordered an investigation into the killing.

The state Police Public Relations Officer, SP Grace Iringe-Koko, in a statement, eath Relation Rough the American the American the Commission of th

The state Police Public Relations Officer, SP Grace Tringe-Koko, in a statement, said Echeng had vowed to bring the perpetrators to book. "From information gathered, the campaign DG was shot by yet-to-be-identified gummen in the afternoon of Saturday, March 18, 2023.

"The Commissioner of Police commiserates with the family of the bereaved and has promised to bring perpetrators of such heinous crime to justice," she added. Reacting to Lennard's death, the governorship candidate of the APC in the state, Tonye Patrick-Cole, vowed to bring the killers to book. In a video shared by the leader of Ahoada West LGA and APC candidate, Rivers West Senatorial District, Asita Honourable, when he visited the family of the deceased on Monday, an edderly man, believed to be one of the relatives of Lennard, was seen wailing and lamenting the loss. "Who will take care of us now? We have no breadwinner. He was our breadwinner," the aged man cried.

As though foreseeing his death, Lennard had written on his Pacebook page on his birthday in 2020, "L...] And in the end, it's not the years into your life that counts. It is the life in your years."

is the life in your years

Killed on birthday eve

An ad học election official, Arumodum Akoi, who served in Ward Seven, Abua
Central, Abua-Odual LOA, Rivers State, was killed on the same day Lennard was

shot dead.

It was the eve of his birthday.

Byswitnesses, who claimed to have witnessed the attack, said some gun-wielding
thugs stormed the polling unit to snatch a ballot box but were resisted by someyouths, including Akoi.

An eyewitness, who gave his name only as Ponwei, said Akoi was 'targeted and
shot by the boodhums'.

The was life they were sont Akoi is besset in Abois but he was a classe was a

snot by the hostinums.

"It was like they were sent. Akoi is based in Abuja but he was a strong man in the 13. They clearly came to take him out, because they knew that as long as he was there, he would not let them rig the process being a bona fide son of the land,"

Mr Waribo Karibo, a cousin to Akoi, said his heart still bled from the pain of losing his young

consin.

He said, "My cousin, Arumodun Akoi's life was cut short by agents of political leaders of the major political parties in Abua/ Odual LGA while performing INEC ad hoc duties as an assistant presiding officer."

According to Karibo, Akoi worked with one of the federal agencies in Abuja and was an ardent member of the Abuja chapter of the IJaw

Arden memor one rough carry this year, we discussed his marriage and the need to settle down but was surprised to hear that he is no

"The pain inflicted on the family will not be in vain as the families of the politicians and their unborn generations will reap the same,"

Saturday PUNCH gathered that over 11 people were killed in the just-concluded elections in Rivers State alone.

It was learnt that a pregnant woman, Ruth Osah, and a member of a local vigilance group, Emohus Vigilant Service, Mark Orduse, were the victims.

Two houses were also burnt in the incident at Ubirnira, Emohusa LGA, causing people to flee the area for safety.

The President of Ubimini Youth Council, Mr Ikechukwu Wordu constrained the development.

Caught in the midst

The still like a dream for the family of a security guard. Mr Akinsola Abusel, who was killed by suspected political things during the governorship and hance of assembly polls in Lagre.

The 34-year-old father of three until his death worked as a security guard at the Royal Carden Estate. Lagos.

Narrating the incident that led to his death, his younger brother, Yusad, go an interview with Sournday PUNCH, said his brother was on his regular security duties on the extended in the first security duties.

on the estate when his life was cut short.

On the estate when his hie was cut want.

He said, "My brother was just going around the estate to see what was going on when he noticed some suspicious movement inside one of the uncompleted.

buildings on the estate.

"He approached the place and saw some men with INEC materials thumbrinting on the ballot papers. Before he could run away, he was caught by the men, who stabbed him multiple times and fled."

Almed's wife said she fainted and broke her phone when she learnt of her husband's death.

She caid "Ten medicine to very with a reighbour's phone Michigand and I had."

nussiand's deam. She said, "I am speaking to you with a neighbour's phone. My husband and I had three children together. We were supposed to start the Ramadan fast on Thursday. I still cannot believe it. He didn't even go out to vote. He was just doing his work as

a security guard. a security guard.
"Who will save me? Who will help me? Who will take care of these children? He
was our all in all. It was from the salary of his job that we are, paid rent and the
children's school fees. I am finished."

Yusuf said Ahmed was buried according to Islamic rites on Thursday

They (hoodlums) stabbed him multiple times and ran away' he said.

A colleague of Ahmed, who did not want to be named for security reasons, said the victim bled to death.

"I learnt he was rushed to a hospital but he couldn't make it. He bled to death.

Killed by shock

A 68-year-old man, Simon Maduekwe, was also a victim of election violence in

Maduacke, who was hypertensive, was said to have died from shock, when suspected political thugs invaded his residence on Fatomi Crescent, Off Bajulaiye Compound, Somolu, Lagos State.

The hoodlums were said to be after a youth who used a mobile phone to record.

The hoodiums were said to be aner a yount who used a moone phone to record, their violent actions at one of the polling units in the area.

Saturday PUNCH gathered that voting was ongoing when the things started warning voters not to vote anyone other than their preferred candidate.

Maduckwe's son, Chuka, said his father was at home when one of the political

thugs, while subjecting some of the voters to different forms of intimidation and suppression, spotted a resident capturing the moments on his mobile phone.

The thug, thereafter, raised the alarm, which attracted the attention of his

accomplies.

Chulan said they gave the resident, who firmly held on to his phone, a hot chase.

In a desperate attempt to escape, the aggrieved son said the resident ran into his father's house, adding that the thugs ran after him.

Chulan explained that his father, who was not aware of what had transpired outside his home, upon sighting the thuge on his premises, thought they were there to attack him for voting against their preferred candidate.

"My dad was estinding at the door and as the guy and the thugs ran toward him, he collarsed."

"My dad was etanding at the tool and as the collapsed."
"We fried to revive him but couldn't, so, we rushed him to the Somolu General Hospital and a nurse confirmed to us that he was dead. My dad had high blood pressure and had not been doing business for over a year as we had been doing everything to keep him alive but he died because of that incident.
"My mum is just trying to fully understand what happened. We never anticipated that this election will take him away from us," he added.

Election violence in Nigeria

The Armed Conflict Location and-Iwent Data Project, a non-governmental organisation which specialised in disaggregated conflict data collection, analysis, and criss mapping, in a recent report, warned against violence during the 2023 elections.

The electoral campaign has further polarised the political and media environment.

with numerous allegations against partisan outlets and political candidates refusing to

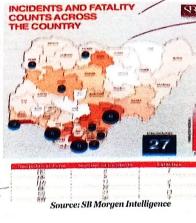
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report.

Violent acts carried out by supporters of political parties have spiked each election year

During previous election cycles, partisan violence escalated along ethnic and sectarian lines, resulting in multiple rounds of revenge

killings.
ACLED noted, "The magnitude of electoral unrest was recorded at its highest in 2011 when clashes between supporters of the then-ruling PDP and the Congress for Progressive Change which later merged into the APC - claimed



## to election violence - Famil











an estimated 800 lives following the election of President Goodluck Jonathan.4 Likewise, hundreds were reported to have died during the following elections in 2015 and 2010

In the 12 months preceding the 2023 elections, ACLED recorded over 200 violent events involving party members and supporters of politicians, resulting in nearly 100 feebles.

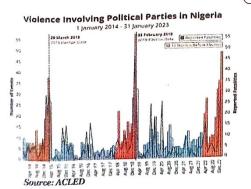
100 fatalities.

These numbers are largely in line with the run-ups to the previous two election years, with over 150 events and more than 100 reported fatalities between 2018 and 2019, and an estimated 115 events and over 90 fatalities between 2014 and 2015.

The South-East (46 events) and the South-West (45) registered the highest number of violent events involving party supporters before the 2023 elections, followed by the South-South (38) and North Central (32) areas. Nearly one in 10 events took place in the battleground state of Osun, where both the PDP and APC have traded allegations over inciting violence against their rivals.

"Half of the violence involving party supporters in the 12 months before the 2023 election involves direct, organised attacks against civilians, followed by mob violence and abductions," the report stated.

and abductions," the report stated. Unarmed civilians were the target of violence in around 80 per cent of the events recorded by ACLED, accounting for approximately 75 of the nearly 100 fatalities arising from events between February 2022 and February 2023.



firm, SB Morgen, revealed that 27 Nigerians were killed in 57 politically-motivated violent incidents between January and December

The report, titled, 'Insecurity and the 2023 Elections, added that elections in Nigeria were a hotly-contested affair, with vested interests from the politicking to the aspirants.

109 deaths in three months linked to 2023 elections' A total of 109 election-related deaths were

recorded across Nigeria in the build-up to the 2023 general elections, a pro-democracy think-thank, Centre for Democracy and Development, said.

The organisation noted that its tracker recorded the deaths between January 1 and

March 10, 2023.
"Osun, Imo and Ebonyi have also seen a number of incidents in the past three months that could disrupt state house of assembly polls taking place in the state. "In total, 109 deaths linked to political

violence have been recorded from the start of the year to March 10, 2023, according to the tracker," it stated in a statement by its director, Idayat Hassan.

27 killed in governorship poll -Report No fewer than 27 people were <u>killed during</u>

the March 18 governorship and House of Assembly elections held across the country, SB Morgen Intelligence stated.

SB Morgen Intelligence stated.

The organisation, in its report titled, NigeriaDecides2023: State of Violence, released on Monday, listed states where people were killed to include Rivers, Delta, Benue, Alswa Ibom, Ebonyi, Niger, Kebbi, Katsina, Cross River, and Lagos.

According to the report, the South-South region led in the number of causalities with 24 cases of violence. The North-Central recorded seven deaths in eight cases of

recorded seven deaths in eight cases of

In the South-West, 30 cases of violence were recorded, which resulted in three deaths, while in the North-West, 11 cases of violence resulted in two deaths.

The South-East had 12 cases of violence. which resulted in one death, while in the North-East, five cases of violence were recorded with no death.

In all, 10 states were spotlighted for the

extreme violence that led to the death of many Nigerians.

The organisation also said the casualties might be more, as it was still monitoring unfolding developments.

"The March 18 governorship and House of Assembly elections, held after the

presidential and National Assembly elections, were characterised by poor turnout; but many had hoped that the 2023 elections would be better, given the initial widespread enthusiasm," the report read in part.

"Our research shows that logistics issues and violence resurfaced and Nigeria's elections risk normalising ethnic-based voter suppression.

"Thugs hijacked and burnt election materials in Ogbia, Bayelsa, making the

Independent National Electoral Commission officials flee to Yenagoa for safety. 'Iceland' members were accused of threatening non-PDP voters in Rivers, while some thugs forcefully demanded access to election materials in Akwa-Ibom.

"The most striking examples of violence are from Lagos and other states where a long-standing ruling party wants to stay in power forcefully," the report

Other cases

A party agent with the Labour Party in the Trade Fair area of Lagos State, Onycka Abali, was among

He was the party's polling unit agent in the area.

Abali was reportedly shot by thugs on Saturday and left to bleed to death.

His brother, who did not want to be named, confirmed the incident and said his brother's remains had been taken to his home state for burial.

had been taken to his home state for burnal.

In the Ikorodu area of the state, some political thugs beat up party agents at the org Thomas Polling Unit by Association Avenue, Owede/Ajegunle, off Ikorodu Road.
One of the victims, who also claimed to be an LP party agent, Princess Ann-Ezch, in an interview with Saturday PUNCH, said someone else signed the result sheet with the

pseudonym, Tessy', adding that it was not her name.

She also alleged that she was beaten and pushed away from

An electoral officer in the Ejigbo PU 041, Dablin Jessica, lamented how she was forced to mutilate election results to favour a particular party. She said, 'The thugs got angry when I did not do their bidding even after offering me money. I was ambushed on my way home and my phone was smashed to pieces.

In PU 004, Sinclair Close, Ajangbadi, a voter, who did not want his name in print, said he was harassed and beaten multiple times by suspected political thugs because

he refused to do the bidding of hoodlums.

He said, "They hit me multiple times, made away with my phone, ATM, PVC and the ear pod I just bought. Now, they've transferred all the money in my account to ne number.

Further attempts to get more details about the incident were unsuccessful as the

source stopped responding to Saturday PUNCH's message.

However, videos sent to Saturday PUNCH showed a young man soaked in blood and saying some inaudible words in Yoruba. Violence and intimidation also marred the electoral process in Desa Polling Unit,

Projunction and immediately beginning the video evidence to our correspondent, confirmed that some stick-wielding thugs chased away voters who refused to vote for their

Stabbed for voting A yet-to-be-identified man in Sangotedo was said to have been stabbed by

A yet-to-be-identified man in Sanguedo was said to have been scaled by suspected political thugs for voting for a candidate the thugs did not approve. In a video making the round on social media, the victim, who was soaked in blood, narrated how the thugs stabbed him multiple times. An eyewitness, who spoke to our correspondent on Turitter and wanted to be anonymous, said the incident happened at Ward 6, Edi Osa, Sangotedo. "Soldiers rescued him. It was not just the one you saw in the video. There were

two of them who were stabled by these thugs.

"Two of them were taken to Safeway Hospital. We didn't vote in our polling units. Even the police were helpless. They couldn't do much to help us," the source largest the sourc

In Ebonyi State, a resident, Uzodimma Lucy-Ogodo, told our correspondent she

was stabbed in the left eye for voting against the will of some political thugs.
"I went to my polling unit to perform my civic duty. The thugs followed me to my
polling booth, insisting I vote their will. Of course, I refused and voted my preferred

"After much struggle to tear my ballot paper, in front of the security men and INEC officials, they began to beat me up, tore my clothes and pushed me out. "I am lucky to be alive. They even threatened to kill me if they see me anywhere in town. I won't let anyone bully me into supporting evil," she added.

Civil societies lament bloodbath

120

·Suspected thug (Lagos)

A human rights lawyer, Mr Festus Ogun, said Nigeria had a long history of electoral violence.

He noted that the impunity continued because there were no consequences for perpetrators of mayhem and violence.

"Those who profit from the violence during elections are the same people we

ontinue to recycle in power over the years.

"Because violence works for them, they have continued to weaponise it to steal the true mandates of our people," he added.

The legal practitioner added that with the new Electoral Act (2022) the era (of political violence) was gone.

He said, "Cases in which politicians deliberately unleash violence on their

opponents' stronghold, leading to the total cancellation of votes in those areas, are

Section 24 of the Electoral Act (2022) has now made it clear that deliberately unleashing violence in the stronghold of one's opponents in such a way and manner that voters would be disenfranchised does not automatically mean that the votes in those places where the violence occurred will amount to nothing.

"The new position of the law is that voting in those areas will be suspended. INEC has a duty under Section 24, Sub-section three to fix another date for the conduct of elections in those areas."

elections in unose areas.

The Chairman of the Centre for Anti-Corruption and Open Leadership, Debo Adeniran, noted that Nigerians were generally too emotional about election

That is the extent to which they have been indoctrinated by politicians about and is the execution which they have been indocrimated by politicans about e ethnic and social attachments to whoever is contesting and is supposed to win. "Ordinarily, citizens of different communities will want to defend whoever they

different communities will want to defend whoever they their genuine representative.

"In certain societies, their political leaders are worshipped. This is because they have been impoverished by these politicians so they know that without these politicians their sustemance would be gone," he said.

According to him, politicians make elections a do-or-die affair because it is their means to amass

wealth.

'They (politicians) know that they can only sustain the lavish lifestyle they have adopted for themselves over the years as long as they remain in politics," he added.

Also commenting, the Executive Director, Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre, Auwal Musa Rafsunjani, said the law was too weak in dealing with electoral offences.

Rafsenjani, who is also the beed of the

Rafsanjani, who is also the head of the Transition Monitoring Group, said, 'That is why CISLAC and TMG have been pushing for the establishment of the Electoral

Offences Commission because INEC's hands are tied.

They cannot be conducting elections and, at the same time, taking up

electoral offences

For him, politicians cannot prosecute electoral offenders because they are largely the ones behind the thugs.

"How then will they prosecute those that are arrested? The arrests that the government, through the police, is doing have limitations. If the attorney general of the state is not ready to prosecute them, the cases will die. That is why no one has been dealt with for electoral violence," he added.