

14 feared killed in Benue land dispute

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By Victor Ayeni

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A communal crisis in the Oju Local Government Area of Benue State has reportedly claimed 14 persons with property worth millions of naira destroyed.

City Round gathered that the dispute started on Sunday when youths of Ibilla and Oju communities engaged one another in a bloody fight over land.

Following the clash, the state government, on Monday, imposed a curfew on residents in a bid to stem the tide of violence in the area.

However, on Tuesday, there were reports of reprisals, leading to the loss of more lives.

The youth leader of Igede Youth Council, Andyson Egbodo, during a phone interview with our correspondent, disclosed that calm had returned.

He said, “Some persons have died from both sides and property has been destroyed also. From the information within my reach, about 14 persons have died; two from one community and 12 from the rival community.

“Governor Hyacinth Alia, on Monday, declared a curfew on the two communities, which started from 6pm to 6am. But when the government discovered that the measure wasn’t effective, the curfew was extended to 24 hours starting from Wednesday.

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“On Tuesday, a meeting was convened by elders of the warring communities with the Commissioner of Police at the local government council. Now, everybody has been made to understand that anybody that is caught causing trouble will be shot dead by the military.

“So far, there has been no movement in the warring communities; everybody is indoors and soldiers are patrolling the area. Nobody is fighting again and we hope this will bring lasting peace.”

A native of the area, Mr James Ibechi, told *City Round* that the crisis started when youths took up arms against one another over the location of a private tertiary institution on a piece of land that both clans were laying claims to.

“The immediate cause of the fight was an Australia-based professor from the Ibilla community who proposed to establish a university on a plot of land belonging to the community. The residents objected to the siting of the university on their land because they wanted to know who gave the land to the man.

“When the man mounted the signpost of the proposed university, he wrote on it the name of another community that is not the owner of the land, so that was why the owners protested. Unfortunately, the misunderstanding wasn’t well handled and it led to the fracas,” he added.

The Benue State Police Public Relations Officer, Catherine Anene, denied knowledge of the incident and the killings.