

Outrage as warplane kills 85 in Kaduna village bombing

Nnodim Okechukwu, Solomon Odeniyi, Nathaniel Shaibu, Daniel Adaji, Godwin Isenyo, Ibrahim Hassan-Wuyo

THERE was widespread outrage on Monday over the accidental bombing of Tudun Biri in the Igabi Local Government Area of Kaduna State by the Nigerian Army on Sunday, which left no fewer than 85 villagers dead.

Residents of the affected communities said they were celebrating Maulud, an Islamic event when the bombs were dropped by the military, a development that triggered both local and international condemnation.

The Deputy Governor of Kaduna State, Hadiza Balarabe, had to visit Islamic clerics in the state to douse tension, as the Governor of the state, Senator Uba Sani, ordered a thorough investigation into the bombing to forestall future occurrences.

As the state government moved to douse tension, the Christian Association of Nigeria, Arewa Youth Consultative Forum, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, among others, condemned the recurrent erroneous bombings by the military.

This came as findings by *The PUNCH* showed that no fewer than 425 persons including children and women had been killed by military accidental bombings between September 2017 and 2023.

Kaduna govt speaks

The state government said the Nigerian Army claimed responsibility for dropping the bomb on Tudun Biri that killed scores of villagers during a Maulud celebration.

No fewer than 85 residents were killed in the incident which took place on Sunday night at about 9pm.

The Overseeding Commissioner of Internal Security and Home Affairs, Samuel Aruwan, said the General Officer Commanding 1 Division, Nigerian Army, and Force Commander Operation Whirl Punch, Maj-Gen VU Okoro, admitted that the Nigerian Army was on a routine mission against terrorists when the incident happened.

This was contained in a statement released by the commissioner to journalists shortly after the Deputy Governor, Hadiza Balarabe, met with Islamic clerics, traditional rulers, heads of security agencies, where "the Nigerian Army explained the circumstances which led to the unfortunate and unintended attack."

The meeting was held at the Sir Kashim Ibrahim Government House, Kaduna on Monday.

The commissioner said, "The General Officer Commanding One Division Nigerian Army, Major VU Okoro explained that the Nigerian Army was on a routine

mission against terrorists but inadvertently affected members of the community."

He added that search-and-rescue efforts were still ongoing, as dozens of injured victims during the incident had been evacuated to Barau Dikko Teaching Hospital by the state government.

He also quoted the deputy governor as having commiserated with the victims' families, while praying for the repose of the victims' souls.

The statement stated that among the heads of security agencies who attended the meeting include the Commissioner of Police, MY Garba; and Director of the Department of State Services, Abdul Eneche; Chairman of the Kaduna State Chapter of Jam'atu Nasril Islam, Prof. Shafi'u Abdullahi, who led other religious leaders as well as the District Head of Rigasa, Alhaji Aminu Idris, in whose domain the incident occurred.

The Nigerian Air Force, on Monday, denied that it bombed the Kaduna village.

The NAF Director of Public Relations and Information, Air Commodore Edward Gabkwet, said the service had not conducted any operation in the state and its environs in the last 24 hours.

He added that the Air Force was not the only organisation using armed drones in the North-West.

The statement read, "The news making the rounds alleging that Nigerian Air Force aircraft accidentally killed innocent civilians in Kaduna is false. Please be informed that the NAF has not carried out any air operations within Kaduna State and its environs in the last 24 hours."

"Also, note that the NAF is not the only organisation operating combat-armed drones in the Northwestern region of Nigeria. It is also important to ensure that due diligence is always exhausted by the media before going to press with unverified and unconfirmed reports."

As the Nigeria Air Force distanced itself from the bombing, a resident in one of the affected communities told one of our correspondents that Tudun Biri village was bombed by a flying object and killed locals who were attending a religious ceremony on Sunday night.

"We were celebrating Maulud when the jet dropped the bomb. It resulted in the immediate death of more than 30 people," the resident, who pleaded not to be named, stated.

But the National Emergency Management Agency in a statement on its facebook handle on Monday evening, stated that the death toll had risen to 85.

It stated, "The North-West Zonal Office has received a report of an airstrike incident in Tudun Biri community of the Igabi Local Government Area of Kaduna State. The incident occurred on the

3rd of December 2023 at about 9:00-10:00pm, during a Maulud celebration.

"The North-West zonal Office has received details from the local authorities that 85 dead bodies have so far been buried while search is still ongoing."

"The zonal Office has visited the Barau Dikko hospital where casualties have been treated and saw about 66 persons on admission having sustained various degrees of injuries and fractures. At the time of filing the report, the zonal office could not visit the community due to the tension, although there is ongoing consultations with the religious leaders, traditional rulers and security agencies in order to douse the tension. It is worthy of note that the casualties ranged from children, women and the elderly."

Accidental bombings

The *PUNCH*'s findings showed that no fewer than 425 persons including children and women had been killed by military accidental bombings between September 2017 and 2023.

The figures were obtained from media reports of mishits by the military.

However, there may be more casualties because the number of victims in some cases was not specified.

Some of the incidents include the killing of about 52 people on January 17, 2017, while 120 others sustained injuries after a NAF jet accidentally bombed an Internally Displaced Persons camp in Rann, Borno state.

On December 4, 2017, the military sent a fighter jet to fire rockets at villages as a "warning." Amnesty International said its team which visited the state after the airstrike confirmed that armless residents were attacked by the fighter jet as they attempted to flee.

About 11 people were killed and 20 others were injured from six airstrikes launched on April 9, 2019, in Dumbourou in Zuri LGA.

Nine civilians, including three children, were killed in a strike by the Air Force in a rural community near the border with Niger on September 16, 2021, while 23 people were injured in that mishap.

Also, some villagers alleged that an airstrike by the military on September 26, 2021, killed no fewer than 20 residents in the area. To date, the Air Force has yet to own up to the incident, despite the insistence of the villagers.

In addition, seven children were killed and five injured while being targeted by terrorists in the neighbouring Niger Republic during an airstrike by the Air Force on February 20, 2022.

Another 13 residents were wounded while one other died after a NAF fighter jet struck Kunkuna village in Safana LGA of Katsina, on July 7, 2022.

On December 13, 2022, the properties of residents were destroyed in a miscalculated airstrike in Kaduna. This happened to be the only mishit with no record of citizens killed.

At least 64 persons were killed and many injured in an airstrike by the NAF on December 19, 2022, at Mutumji Community in the Maru Local Government Area of Zamfara State.

There have so far been three cases in 2023, with the Air Force responsible for two and the Nigerian Army involved in one.

In 2023, there were three mishits by the Air Force. The first occurred in Niger State on January 24 which was said to have killed an unspecified number of special hunters of the Joint Security Task Force and residents.

Also on January 25, no fewer than 40 herders were killed, including four in Nasarawa State, during yet another accidental strike.

On Monday, no fewer than 85 persons were killed by a miscalculated airstrike from the Nigerian Army's drone.

The Kaduna chapter of CAN condemned the bombing, as the Arewa Youth Consultative Forum said it was unfortunate that the military whose primary responsibility was to save lives, was the one killing defenceless civilians.

The CAN Chairman in Kaduna State, Rev. John Hayab, said the wrong target was most unfortunate, as he encouraged the Muslim community (Ummah) and the people of Tudun Biri to accept the ill-fated incident not as a deliberate act but as an error that the Nigerian Army had acknowledged and shown regret.

"CAN will continue to pray for the government at all levels and the security personnel that God Almighty will give them the wisdom and understanding to end insecurity and support the maintenance of peaceful coexistence so that citizens will go about their legitimate businesses."

"CAN calls on the security agencies not to relent in the fight against insurgency and prays that society will soon be freed from criminal elements in the country."

"CAN sends its heart-warm condolences to the families who lost loved ones, the Tudun Biri community, and the good people of Igabi Local Government, the Emir of Zazzau, and the government of the state," he stated.

On his part, the AYCF National President, Shettima Yerima, called on the government to carry out a thorough investigation into the matter, adding that the killing was unacceptable.

He said the perpetrators of the so-called mistake must be made to explain beyond reasonable doubts how religious people carrying out religious activities could be mistaken for terrorists.

"While we commiserate with families of those who were killed, we pray God to give speedy recovery to the injured. Enough of this unwarranted killing of innocent people by those who should protect them," he declared.

Amnesty International

Amnesty International called on the Federal Government to overhaul the Nigerian Army over the incessant airstrike occurring in some states across the country.

This was made known by an official of the organisation Mr. Isah Sanusi, in a phone conversation with *The PUNCH*.

Isah noted that although the organisation would not sue the army, the government and its military must put their house in order.

"We do not go into matters like this unless it is considered of utmost importance. However, we condemn the bombing and killing of civilians in Tudun Biri, a village in Kaduna State on Sunday, November 3, 2023."

"Nigerian authorities should carry out a thorough investigation into the incident and compensate the families of the victims because this is not the first time it is happening."

Isah also called on the government and other partners who train the military to ensure they undergo sound training to avoid further occurrence in the future.

On her part, a Nigerian Researcher at the Human Rights Watch, Anietie Ewang, described the recurring erroneous strikes as "a worrying situation", adding that the HRW was also concerned as to whether the military took civilian casualty assessment into consideration before its operations.

"I think we are seeing a worrying situation. Obviously, we can't comment on the specifics of the case until we go into the field to document what has happened and we hear from people on the ground. But apart from that, like more generally, we are very concerned with the news."

"We are concerned with this trend of erroneous airstrikes. We are concerned with whether or not the military is taking into consideration all that is required in terms of civilian casualty assessment, and really investigating its operations to ensure that it complies with international human law, and international humanitarian law standards."

The National Coordinator of the Human Rights Writers Association, Emmanuel Onwubiko, in a statement earlier on Monday, described the casualty as "one accidental bombing too many", while challenging the government of President Tinubu to carry out "an all out investigation with a view to finding lasting solutions to these many accidental bombings of civilians."

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