

Tension rises as second Okuama leader dies in military custody

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Nigeria Military troops

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The Okuama community in the Ughelli South Local Government Area, Delta State, is gripped with fear and anger following the death of its 81-year-old treasurer, Dennis Okugbaye, in military detention.

Okugbaye's demise comes barely six days after the community's President-General, Pa James Oghoroko, reportedly died in similar circumstances in military detention.

Pastor Akpos Okugbaye, the son of the late community treasurer, tearfully announced his father's passing on Tuesday, sending shockwaves through the already mourning community.

Both leaders, alongside others including Prof. Arthur Ekpekpó, Chief Belvis Adogbo, Mrs. Mabel Owhemu, and Mr. Dennis Malaka, were arrested by the military between August 18 and 20, 2024.

The arrests followed the March 14 killing of 17 soldiers on a peace mission aimed at resolving a dispute between Okuama and the neighboring Okoloba community.

The military had responded to the soldiers' deaths with a violent raid on Okuama, reducing the town to ruins and forcing residents to flee to an internally displaced persons camp in Ewu Kingdom, established by the Delta State government.

The death of Pa Okugbaye has reignited community protests.

Aggrieved Okuama youths and women, on Tuesday, renewed their seven-day ultimatum to the Federal Government and the military, demanding the release of all detained leaders and the return of Pa Oghoroko's corpse.

"After the seven days, this river will be blocked. Let the soldiers and Tinubu come and kill us so that we know Okuama is wiped out entirely," protesters declared on Sunday.

Elder Ohwotake Otiero, speaking on behalf of the protesters, condemned the deaths in detention and called for immediate action:

"We want the corpse and those detained to be released immediately. We will take the laws into our hands because we have been pushed to the wall. Why should our P-G be killed through torture?"

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Despite repeated attempts, military authorities have not provided any comments on the situation.

Human rights groups and civil society organisations have also joined in demanding justice.

At a joint press conference in Warri marking International Human Rights Day, advocacy groups, led by Pastor Edewor Egedegbe of Value Rebirth & Empower Initiative , and Sir John Ebireri of Ewu Clan Development Forum, condemned the prolonged detention of Okuama leaders without trial.

"These individuals have been in detention for over 113 days without any charge brought against them. This is a clear violation of their fundamental human rights as guaranteed by the 1999 Constitution. Their detention breaches the principles of democracy and the rule of law," they stated.

The groups demanded an investigation into the deaths of Pa Oghoroko and Pa Okugbaye and urged President Bola Tinubu to intervene.

“We demand that you (President Tinubu) order the immediate and unconditional release of Prof. Arthur Ekpekpó, Mr. Dennis Okugbaye, Hon. Belvis Adogbo, Dennis Amalaka, and Owhemu Mabel, as well as any other detained Okuama indigene. We also demand the establishment of a special commission of inquiry to investigate the March 14 crisis, the military’s reprisal, and the burning of Okuama.”

Also, the Urhobo Media Practitioners and Advocacy Group condemned the military’s actions, describing them as a gross violation of human rights and the dignity of Okuama residents.

“This incident is a gross violation of human rights and an affront to the dignity of the Okuama people,” the group said in a statement signed by Mr. Okpare Theophilus Onojeghen, Chief Omafume Amurun, and Comrade Shedrack Onitsha.

The group urged international human rights organizations to intervene and called for an unbiased investigation into both the killing of soldiers and the subsequent military reprisals.

“As a body of media practitioners, we’ll continue to condemn the gruesome and unjustified killing of the 17 military personnel. While we console the grieving families, we demand an unbiased and holistic probe into the tragic incident,” the group added.

Tensions remain high in Okuama as the ultimatum nears its expiration, with residents vowing to take drastic measures if their demands are not met.