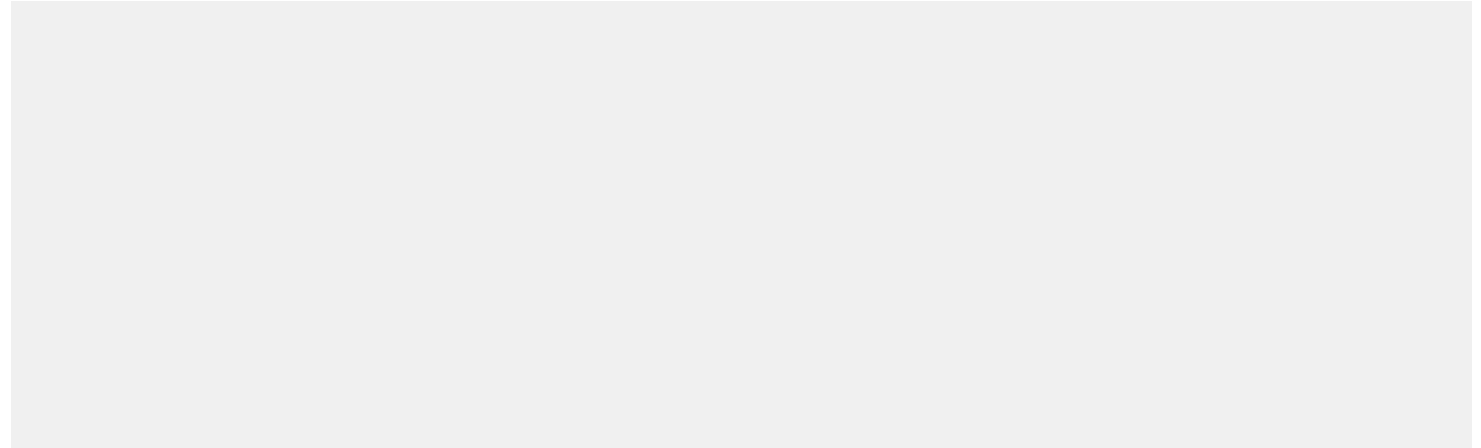


Sokoto bombing: Villagers kick as DHQ declares victims killed by terrorists' explosives

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| Animasahun Salman and Solomon Odeniyi

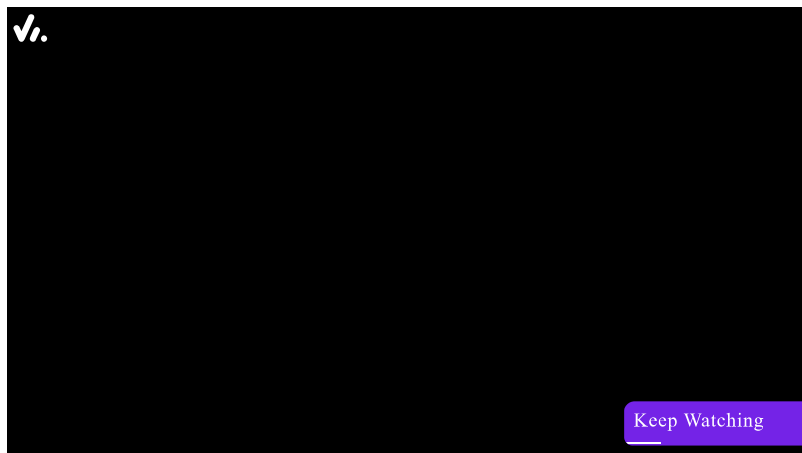


Days after military airstrikes killed at least 10 people in Gidan Sama and Rumtuwa communities in the Silame Local Government Area of Sokoto State on Christmas Day, some residents of the agrarian community have rejected claims by the military that those hit were terrorists.

Reports indicated that the fighter jet was targeting Lakurawa terrorists in the areas, but in the process dropped explosives that killed residents, and livestock, and burnt several food silos and houses.

Although the Nigerian Air Force promised to launch a thorough investigation into the incident, the NAF spokesperson, Air Vice Marshal Olusola Akinboyewa, defended the airstrikes, stating that they were carried out based on credible intelligence from multiple sources and after confirmatory aerial surveillance.

His claim was corroborated by the Coordinator of the Joint Media Coordination Centre of the Operation, Lieutenant-Colonel Abubakar Abdullahi, who insisted that the military operation was based on thorough reconnaissance missions.



When our correspondent visited the LG headquarters on Friday, the mood was tense, and residents wore long faces.

Many people from different communities gathered at the residence of the Local Government Chairman, Alhaji Abubakar Muhammad, to commiserate with him about the incident.

Muhammad insisted that those killed were farmers with no links to terrorists or the alleged Lakurawa sect, as claimed by the military.

The chairman acknowledged the military's efforts in the community but stressed that the attack could not be overlooked.

Saturday PUNCH gathered that the distance between Silame town and the affected communities is about 20 kilometres, which takes approximately five hours when travelling in a small car.

Muhammad said, "It is unfortunate that this is happening. We are deeply saddened by this incident, and we want justice for the victims.

"Look at how they were killed, how the village was razed, and how their food stores were destroyed. It is disheartening. They have really suffered, and it is very unfortunate that such a thing is happening at this time, right after the harvest.

"The community is burnt down, but what can we do? The deed has been done, and it's very unfortunate."

A resident of the community, Faruk Abubakar, who witnessed the attack, said it occurred early in the morning when some residents returned home after praying at the mosque.

He said, "Some of us were sitting where we usually drank early morning pap brought by a woman when we suddenly saw the aircraft flying low and coming towards us. We thought it was just passing through until it lowered further. We started running and heard a loud sound, followed by fire spreading fast.

"Some people were still sleeping in their huts when the bomb landed. Many people were feared dead immediately, while others sustained various degrees of injuries."

Another resident, Alhaji Audu Abubakar, said the incident came to them as a rude shock.

He said, "It was a black Wednesday for our people here. We woke up to the worst calamity we've ever faced.

"It felt like a dream when it happened. I lost my friend in the blast. We were together on Tuesday night, but unfortunately, I woke up on Wednesday only to realise he had died in such a terrible way.

"We need justice for the people who died. We are not criminals and have never harboured any criminals in our midst. The allegations against us are false, and we want this matter thoroughly investigated."

Another villager, Abubakar Silame, condemned the airstrike, stressing that the affected community had never been involved in any security issues.

He said, "The attack came to us unexpectedly. It happened early in the morning when some of us were still sleeping.

“We suddenly saw aircraft moving around our communities. We were surprised to see the aircraft, but before we could figure out what was happening, we heard a loud noise, followed by fire.

“Some of us ran for our lives, not even knowing whether we would survive or not, while others were caught in the fire. It was a terrible situation.

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“We definitely want justice for our people, and we urge both the federal and state governments to come to our aid.

“We have lost our homes, our people, our food store, and all our animals.”

A villager, who did not identify himself, said, “Our food store was razed down. You know, we just finished harvesting, and everything we had stored is gone. All our animals, including camels, cows, goats, and others, are all dead.”

A young girl, who identified herself simply as Hauwa'u, said she witnessed the moment her parents and three younger siblings were burned to death in the airstrike by the military.

“I saw them burning: my mother, my father, and my three younger siblings,” she stated.

When *Saturday PUNCH* visited the injured victims at the Usmanu Danfodiyo University Teaching Hospital, it was gathered that two of them had been discharged.

Nurses at the hospital, who took our correspondent round, said six persons were brought into the hospital and two had been discharged.

The remaining four patients were said to be in critical condition.

“They were six people initially but we have discharged two with minor injuries,” a nurse said.

DHQ blames terrorists' explosives

Meanwhile, the Defence Headquarters on Friday clarified that the deaths of 10 villagers in Sokoto State were caused by a secondary explosion at the Lakurawa terrorist logistics base, not by an airstrike conducted by the Nigerian Air Force.

Addressing journalists in Abuja, the Director of Defence Media Operations, Major General Edward Buba, explained that the airstrike was a precision-guided operation targeting the terrorist hideout in the area.

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He maintained that the fatalities resulted from the secondary explosion triggered by the destruction of the terrorists' logistics base.

"The airstrike indeed hit the logistics base of the terrorists, which led to secondary explosions. It was these explosions that caused the casualties reported earlier," Buba stated.

He further said that the terrorists' logistics base housed dangerous ammunition, including hand cartridges and explosives, which detonated when struck by the Air Force's precision munition.

Buba said, "When I talk about the logistics base, I'm referring to hand cartridges and poles that were kept there. So, naturally, when the munition hits, there will be a secondary explosion, leading to other materials being launched into the air, which caused the death of about 10 people who were not hit directly by the airstrikes."

He maintained that intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and human intelligence were carried out over an extended period before the operation was conducted.

The director also mentioned that the operation was initially scheduled for an earlier date but was postponed to avoid human casualties.

Reacting, a senior government official in the state, who spoke on condition of anonymity, dismissed the new statement of the military.

He reaffirmed that eyewitnesses confirmed that it was the strike from the aircraft that killed the residents.

He said, "How can they deny what they did? There was nothing like maybe it hit something or whatever.

"Our preliminary investigation on the spot confirmed that it was what they threw that caused the killing; they should stop telling lies."