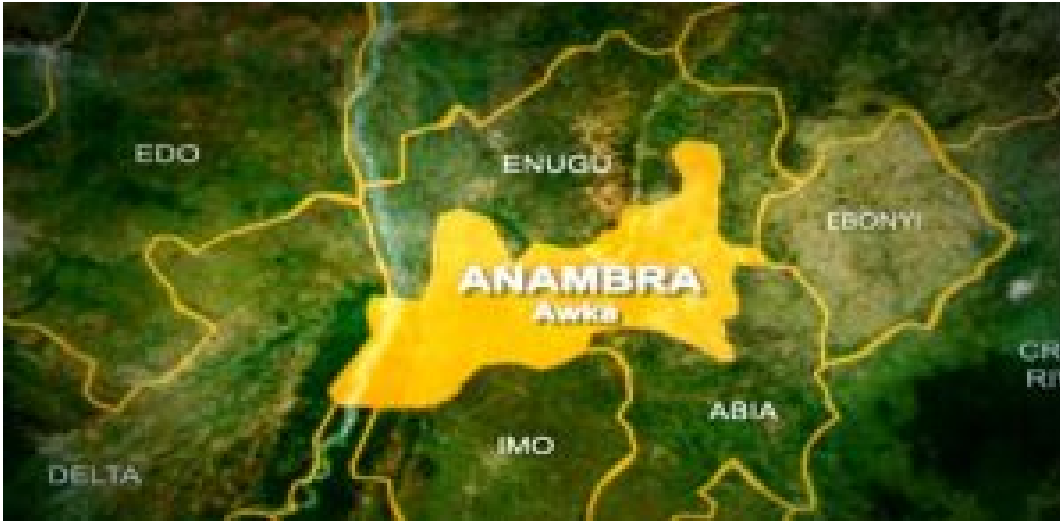


Anambra brigade operatives arrested over pregnant woman, four traders' killing

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By Ikenna Obianeri

Operatives of the Operation Clean and Healthy Anambra State, also known as “OCHA Brigade”, who were involved in a shooting incident that claimed the lives of a pregnant woman and four others, have been arrested.

The operatives were said to be on an enforcement exercise near the Emeka Offor Plaza, Main Market, Onitsha, on Tuesday, when an altercation ensued between them and traders, leading to the shooting that sent panic in the market.

The Managing Director of the OCHA Brigade, Mr Celestine Anere, disclosed this in an interview with our correspondent on Tuesday.

The OCHA Brigade is a state-run enforcement agency tasked with ensuring environmental sustainability, enforcing government policies on cleanliness, order, and discipline, and improving the overall health of Anambra State.

Its activities include clearing illegal structures, enforcing proper waste disposal, ensuring roads remain clear of obstructions like roadside trading, and confiscating products from illegal businesses.

Eyewitnesses in the market said the shooting led to the death of five people, including a pregnant woman, but police authorities insisted that only one woman died, while four others were injured and rushed to a hospital for treatment.

The Anambra State Police Command said it had extended an invitation to the management of the operatives of the brigade over the shooting that led to the alleged killing of the pregnant woman and others.

The spokesman for the command, SP Tochukwu Ikenga, said the move was to properly investigate the incident and for the enforcement team to identify the suspects for prosecution.

The killing raised condemnation of the activities of some law enforcement agents recruited by the state government.

But in reaction, the Anambra State Government said the operatives who went for the exercise that led to the shooting were not unauthorised, adding that the leadership of the OCHA Brigade had dismissed those involved as not having the authority to go on the operation.

Speaking on the development, Anere clarified that, “The operation was not approved by the leadership of the agency, and such unsanctioned actions contradict the clear standards guiding the operations of the brigade.

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“Those involved have been taken into custody and will be handed over to the police and the Department of State Services for thorough investigation.”

Anere reiterated that the state governor, Prof. Chukwuma Soludo administration remained on top gear in its efforts to entrench discipline, restore sanity and ensure a clean, green and livable Anambra.

He assured the state that any operative found culpable would face decisive sanctions, while reaffirming that all enforcement activities of the OCHA Brigade must strictly align with the law establishing the agency.

Eyewitnesses near the scene told our correspondent that the incident created panic and outrage among traders and residents who fled the scene for safety.

An eyewitness, who identified herself simply as Chinwendu, said, “The incident occurred this morning (Tuesday) as some traders were displaying their wares. The operatives of OCHA Brigade came to the place and forcefully ordered them to remove their wares.

“This led to some altercations between the traders and the operatives and in the process of dragging the wares, the operatives opened fire and started shooting in the air. This led to pandemonium as people, including traders and passers-by, scampered to safety.

“This is heartbreaking. As a result of the shooting, four innocent people who left their homes this morning were shot by stray bullets. Among them is a pregnant woman and three others. Their lifeless bodies were later carried away by police operatives who arrived at the scene.”

Another eyewitness who craved anonymity said, “Following the death of the pregnant woman and the two traders, the OCHA operatives involved in the struggle with the traders took to their heels for fear of being lynched by angry traders.

“Some were sighted on the streets of Onitsha, removing their uniforms to avoid easy identification and attack on them. Angered by the death of the pregnant woman and the traders, with bullet wounds on another, some aggrieved traders in the Onitsha Main Market took to the streets and nearby roads and started breaking bottles in search of other operatives of the brigade.

“The development has fuelled widespread anger, with the traders lamenting how operatives have been terrorising them at the markets.”

When our correspondent visited the Federal Medical Centre, Onitsha, where the dead pregnant woman’s body was deposited in the mortuary, and the three bullet wound victims were being treated, it was revealed that the chances of survival of one of the victims whose face was shattered with bullets were very slim.