

NEWS PLUS



• The deserted community



• Empty houses

Cultists sack Rivers community

...But JTF says, we'll soon return normalcy



• Mbadike

FROM FEMI FOLARANMI, YENAGOA

Anyone visiting Ibaa, a community in Emouha Local Government Area of Rivers State, would notice a giant signpost with the inscription: *Welcome to Ibaa Community, Land of Peace and Hospitality. Our youths shun cultism, bloodshed and Violence.*

But the situation in Ibaa today does not have any bearing with the inscription on the signpost. Peace has taken flight from the community. Cult groups have seized the community by the jugular; they have brought the community to her knees. Indeed the Amara, the popular yam festival that attracts visitors to the community, stands the risk of not holding if the hitherto bubbling Ibaa is not back on her feet.

Trouble began for Ibaa in January when some cult groups killed the head of the community vigilance group, Chief Maxwell. The cultists also destroyed houses and graduated to oil pipeline vandalism and stealing.

Unable to bear the trauma being visited on the community by the secret societies, the community elders wrote a petition to the Commander of the Joint Task Force (JTF) codenamed, Operation Pulo Shield, Major-General Emmanuel Atewe, and requested for deployment of troops to restore peace in the troubled community.

On April 12, Atewe led component commanders of the JTF from Yenagoa to Ibaa and, after consultation with the 2 Brigade, deployed troops to the community.

Mr. Ndubusi Mbadike explained that the cultists had instilled fear in the people through the killings and unleashing of

violence.

"The cultists shot the chairman of the community vigilance group, Chief Maxwell. After a while, they killed another man, Chief Joger. Shortly after, they started breaking into some of our prominent people's houses. I was also attacked but I escaped. They instilled fear into people and they deserted the community. All the people you are seeing now only returned because of the soldiers. By evening, they would have left because the boys have been raping people's wives. They would ask the husbands to put on a torch while they (cultists) rape the women. People are now afraid. We invited the soldiers to secure lives and property. We want to give information to soldiers to assist them to rid the community of cultists," he volunteered.

A prominent chief in the community, Chief Sunday Amadi said Ibaa residents did not know the grouse of the cultists for attacking the community. He said they had accused the late Chief Maxwell of frustrating their activities.

"The climax of this crisis was the killing of the head of the community's vigilance group, Chief Maxwell. The kingmakers, through the town crier, appealed for information about the killers. The kingmakers performed a libation that whoever killed Chief Maxwell should die. Shortly after the event, cultists, numbering over 100 invaded the community and destroyed our houses on January 31. We had no option than to run away for our dear lives.

"We do not know the cause of their problem. What we heard was that they accused Chief Maxwell of preventing them from carrying out their nefarious activities.

They said he had been disturbing them by rescuing those they had kidnapped. That was why they murdered him. After people fled the community, they started engaging in pipeline vandalism," he said.

Amadi noted that after several petitions that were unanswered, the community had to quickly appeal to the JTF to intervene so that the community could get back on its feet.

"We have written petitions to the government and since we did not get any response, we had to appeal to the JTF to intervene. This community is noted for farming and this is the commencement of the farming season, but they are not allowing us. We want to appeal to government to ensure that the JTF remains permanent in Ibaa till our community is calm," he pleaded.

Mr. Marvellous, a medical worker at the now deserted Ibaa Primary Health Centre, lamented that the crisis was having a negative impact on the community, noting that patients no longer go to the health centre just as the immunization exercise was being affected.

"Before, patients do come to this hospital. But now, people do not come due to the crisis in the community. The people are afraid. Many houses have been attacked and people are unsure of their safety and are running away. Government should intervene. This is a bubbling community but now it is deserted. This has affected the immunization exercise. Soldiers should do their best and go in search of the people behind this," he said.

Mr. Mbadike said he hoped the JTF intervention would help the community return to its normal life, asserting that the colossal loss would be far-reaching if the

crisis continued.

"Ibaa community is a bubbling community, but because of this crisis, people have deserted it. We have a festival called Amara. We are to hold it in July. People usually come to celebrate with us and enjoy our new yam festival. Our women are very good farmers but they are afraid to go to farm because they have been attacked severally. Now school was forced to stop because of their activities. Our children were unable to write exams. If you have been to our community before, you would cry that this is our community now. We hope the JTF intervention would ensure the early resolution of the crisis."

The JTF Media coordinator, Lt. Col Mustapha Anka appealed to the natives of the community to return home, assuring that the soldiers deployed would ensure that peace reigned in the community.

He said the visit of the JTF commander and other component commanders was enough assurance that the peace was no longer far from the community.

"Reports that reached us indicated that there was a scuffle between two cult groups. Their activities covered a wide range of criminal acts including bursting of pipelines. The community was being deserted and the headquarters of JTF Pulo Shield, under the Command of Major General Atewe visited the community with other component commanders. The JTF, in collaboration with 2 Brigade, is doing its best to ensure that normalcy returns to Ibaa community. The Commander is urging all the community leaders and other natives to return home to continue their normal lives while efforts are put in place to maintain peace," Col Anka