

## Top Stories

# Rape, murder as Fulani herdsmen invade Delta communities

BY TONY OGAGA ERHARIEFE

**F**or 55 year-old Mrs. Margaret Okotie, widow and mother of five, her only crime was that she was determined to put food on her table against the odds! Though just recuperating from illness, she made it to her four-acre-cassava plantation that fateful Sunday morning of March 20, 2012. However, she never made it back; Okotie was brutally murdered in cold blood on her farm!

"My mum was a dedicated mother. Though our father died long ago, she did all she could to make us happy. Hausa/Fulani herdsmen attacked and snuffed out her life on March 20, 2012, after she tried to stop their cattle from grazing on her crops," recounts Kate, late Okotie's daughter.

Kate says that when her mum left home that fateful morning, she had tried to dissuade her albeit unsuccessfully. However, a few hours later, those who had gone to the farm with her ran back to inform her that her mum had been attacked by herdsmen.

"I rushed to the farm and when I saw her, she was bleeding. She had been stabbed thrice. We rushed her to the hospital but before we made it, she was dead! She was killed by Hausa/Fulani herdsmen for trying to stop them from grazing their cattle on her farm."

Kate's tale is one of many of the sad tales emanating from these communities. For a couple of years, the people of Urhuoka, Abraka and Ukwani communities in Ethiope East Local Government Area of Delta State have enjoyed relative peace. An agrarian community, the land is the only source of living. However, all that is threatened now as rape, death and hunger are their lot due to the alleged activities of Hausa/Fulani herdsmen.

The crisis hit a climax recently when elders of Urhuoka Community, after a series of violent attacks and robberies petitioned the Delta State Government and made a copy available to *Sunday Sun*.

Dated March 25 and signed by elders of Urhuoka, the petition cited the killing of Margaret Okotie and the raping of three women including the shooting of a farmer, Ufuoma Efeya, with an AK 47 assault rifle which culminated in his death.

Commenting, Johnny O. Monday, the President General of Urhuoka, Abraka Community, said that the matter was reported to the former Abraka DPO, the Commissioner of Police, the Area Commander and the Deputy Governor of the state and the events were published in newspapers but nothing was done to remedy the situation.

Hear him: "If they are not checked, they will throw us into starvation. We don't have garri or corn to sell and there's nothing we can do because those who have invaded our farmlands are armed with guns. When we complain they say that we are a community of trouble makers, meanwhile, the Hausa/Fulani are killing our people!"

### Sorrow, tears and blood

When *Sunday Sun* visited Urhuoka community it was a harvest of woes. Fela's song, Sorrow, Tears and Blood



•Kate with portrait of her mum, the late Mrs. Margaret Okotie.

aptly captured the situation.

"They are Boko Haram," cried Chief George Ossai, Chairman, Head Farmers Obiaroko/Abraka community who has lost 30 acres of farmlands so far, "they carry AK 47 rifles and if you challenge them they threaten you with death. We have no cassava to start up farming next year so we are facing famine. I lost 30 acres to cattle and I have nowhere to cry to," Ossai lamented.

According to Duke Idigun, a head farmer who has over 170 farmers under him: "There is nothing left, the cows have destroyed everything and forced us to abandon our farms. I'm a Head Farmer, this is planting season when I'm supposed to plant my crops and give out land to farmers but I'm broke! Nobody will come and take land from me because of these herdsmen."

"My seven and half acre farm was destroyed along with the hundreds of acres I gave out. Now my farmers are angry with me because I can't protect them and whenever we complain they say that we are trouble makers. Unless something is done soon, this could be another Jos in the making!"

Austin was a plumber but business became bad so he turned to farming. When Austin left home on the morning

of January 23, he was full of hope that soon the rains would come and ensure a robust harvest but he was wrong! He was attacked by herdsmen and his index finger chopped off as he fled for dear life.

"I spent over N200,000 on treatment," laments Austin, "I was hospitalized for two weeks. It all happened on the afternoon of January 23. I was returning from the farm around 3pm in the afternoon when herdsmen intercepted me with their cows."

"Angrily I asked, 'what is the meaning of this?' Rather than apologise, he screamed, 'you people are the ones fighting us' and then he struck me with his machete and cut of my index finger. I jumped off my bike bleeding and he gave me hot chase with the lady I was carrying; we were lucky to escape!"

Mrs. Lucky Ese, a head farmer and another victim who has lost several millions since the invasion says it's been a tale of total loss. "For the last six market days our women have nothing to show, instead they go to the market to see what they can bring home to feed. Last year there was no corn from Abraka because the cows destroyed everything; we had to buy corn from Edo State."

"Cassava is very important to us but the herdsmen are saying cassava is more nutritious for their cows instead of grass. I invested close to half a million naira but now everything is gone. Where do I go from here," she asks rhetorically shaking her head in regret.

Queen Ekhwarrieme is a septuagenarian. She says she barely escaped rape and murder three months ago when her farm was invaded. She says she was chased off her farm, her phones were seized and she received a thorough beaten which culminated in hospitalisation.

"They chased me and I fell down. One of them stepped on my chest. I became sick and was hospitalized. But when I went back to my farm a month later, all my crops had been destroyed! My crime was that I tried to stop them from destroying my crops. I have 10 children and there is no way we can feed; please chase them away from our farms and compensate us."

Vero Kigho, a mother of eight kids has lost four acres to the invaders and now she's in serious debt. According to her, had she not run for dear life the day the herdsmen visited her farm, she would have been killed.

"They've eaten all my cassava. I don't have money to feed my kids and I am indebted. Had they caught me, I would have been raped and killed. I can no longer support my husband; we are hungry right now."

Lamenting her plight, another widow, Felicia Ulumojiri said that all her efforts over the last two years have been destroyed. Twice she planted cassava and twice her crops were grazed: "Once they see that it is growing again they bring their cows and destroy everything. It's the cassava that I use to train my kids. One is in the university and their father died three years ago, so I'm the sole bread winner; Uduaghan please come to our aid." She lamented

Samson Akpomedaye is a frustrated man! The Secretary of Ufuoma Farmers Multi Purpose Cooperative Society who has been farming since 1999 is bitter and says he is relocating because of the crisis: "They are a plague on our lives. I have four acres made of pineapples, plantain and cassava. The pineapples they could not graze on, they used dagger to destroy and now I am totally finished! I am not from Abraka so I am going back to my village because of hunger."

45-year-old Justina Oderowho is a mother of eight. She now has to work on construction sites to make ends meet: "Cassava is finished. Go through the farms you won't find any. Cassava is the strength of the women in this community; it is what empowers us. Now the Hausa/Fulani have taken over and imposed hunger on us. To survive I have become a construction worker and have to carry concrete at my age; this is so sad."

Clark Omavuaeye, who barely escaped with his life on December 5, 2013 and who has lost 10 acres to the invasion has a dire warning: "We are already in June but those who started farming in October have nothing to show for it. We are facing hunger and starvation and if this continues more than this month, all our efforts would be jeopardized."

### How we were robbed

At the home of the Eyefias' the walls and roof are riddled with bullet holes from AK 47 and pump action rifles. Narrating her tale, widow and mother of eight, Mercy Eyefia, recounts how mayhem was visited upon her and her family by armed bandits believed to be herdsmen: "It all started around 9pm in the evening. They were eight in number. They came with AK 47 and pump action rifles. We were in the house watching TV when I drifted into sleep."

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