

Life & Living

Old man who saw evil

■ 68-year-old farmer recalls how Boko Haram killed his 2 sons, 4 nephews and 124 others in a Borno village

BY CHIOMA IGBOKWE

"They led us all to a graveyard and kept chanting *Allahu akbar*. They forced us to kneel down and started beheading us one after the other. When it got to my turn, their leader said I should be spared that I had less than two years to die. They slaughtered more than 130 young men including two of my sons." This is the pathetic account of a 68-year-old Mohammed Umar who recently witnessed the gruesome execution of more than 130 young men including two of his sons and four nephews in Bangi village, Bama Local Government Area of Borno State by Boko Haram insurgents ravaging the North East. Though Umar and several others escaped to Lagos, he is still recovering from the shock of the attack, a month after he was discharged from the hospital.

With the advancement of Boko Haram fighters, Umar, who spoke in Kanuri language, said that the Bangi residents hoped that the invasion will not get to them. They had their hope dashed when in early October, Boko Haram members in their numbers invaded the village and set it on fire.

"Ever since they took over Bama village, no security man had dared to venture close to our area. The entire traditional rulers have since fled their palaces. We were on our own and hoped and prayed that they will not attack us till that fateful morning when they struck. They also destroyed 26 villages which include Mingolo, Kulumba, Mailari, Zawgari Ali Chinguri and several others under Bama local government," Umar said.

The invasion

According to Umar, the Bangi villagers and others knew that Boko Haram had taken over control of Bama Local Government Area and had since stopped destroying villages. He claimed that they were keeping to the rule of the sect as a guarantee that they will not destroy their village till they surprisingly struck. "The community was gradually putting their lives together when they stormed the village, two months ago. At about 5.30 am, they stormed our village with about 18 Hilux vans and more than 60 motorcycles. They were also with three armoured tanks. They started releasing their explosives while they rounded up the men in the community. Those that resisted were killed instantly including their wives if they attempted to help their husbands or sons. They marched us all to the graveyard and were accusing us of helping the Federal Government. They said that they got information that we were saboteurs. They said that the recent successful attack by the Federal Government on their troops was because of the information we gave to the government.

"At the graveyard, they started sorting out those whom they felt were too old, 70 and above. When they got to my turn and asked my age, I told that I am 68, they still insisted that I should be killed since I was not up to 70. Already kneeling down and praying to Allah to accept my soul, one of their leaders told them to leave me that I had about two years to live. They believed that 70 is the ripe age. This was



Umar

how I was spared. They lined up the rest including two of my sons, and four nephews. They asked them to kneel down and beheaded them one after the other. It was horrifying watching them die in such a callous way. Allah knows the best," Umar said, battling to hold back tears.

Continuing, he lamented: "I had begged my sons to leave the town when it was obvious that Boko Haram members were in control, but they insisted that they will stay back and protect their families. Who is going to protect their wives and children now that they are dead? I have never seen such in my entire life. They slaughtered them like chicken, despite their cry for mercy. Others who begged that they were ready to serve the sect were not spared either. They asked them why they did not enroll initially when they were recruiting them in the villages."

According to Umar, their assailants were not all Nigerians. "There were few Nigerians in their midst as you can identify them by their language. They spoke Kanuri language, the others are from Niger and Chad. They also had several white men with curly hair in their midst. In fact, those ones were the leaders," Umar described.

The escape

Saved but still at risk of being struck by explosives or stray bullets, Umar and several others headed for the bush. "After the execution, they started setting houses on fire. They

destroyed our borehole, went to the farm store and set it also on fire. They were throwing grenade and other explosives everywhere. It was a war zone. I have never seen such a thing like that. I had 500 bags of guinea corn and all was set on fire. It was a disaster. All was lost, so we started running into the bush. Most of the elders that were spared stayed back but I decided to leave since God allowed them to spare my life", he stated.

On the fleeing train were hundreds of villagers amongst them pregnant women. "We trekked for four days in the forest till we got to Jimbe village. On the way, six pregnant women gave birth and we thank Allah that none of them died on the way. When we got to Jimbe, we boarded a truck to Gambaro and another to Maiduguri. I was very ill and was moved to a nearby hospital but the number of casualty was so much. I was not getting any better. We waited till there was a truck travelling down to Lagos with loads of yams and guinea corn. They were the ones who carried most of us down to Lagos. We were about 200 of us that left for Lagos on the same day. I thank Allah who made it possible that I got to Lagos alive to meet my nephew who rushed me to the hospital. I was hospitalized for more than a month. I am begging the Federal Government to help us and recover our land from Boko Haram", Umar pleaded.

Life inside Boko Haram caliphate

Long before the attack, Umar said that the

community had learnt how to live in peace under Boko Haram government rules and regulations. His words: "They controlled the market. We were only allowed to travel to Mongolo market which was still in existence to buy food for our family. But the rule is that you are expected to return with the same number of persons that you left with or risk being executed. It was the duty of the driver of the vehicle to ensure that none of us escapes. The driver must have registered and got an approval from the sect to operate freely. We were made to pay ten times the original fare. The excess would be remitted to the sect by the driver at the end of the day. To be sure that you are loyal to their government, everyone is expected to step down from the car and chant songs praising them for delivering us from the hand of the enemy (Federal Government) and swear that we will be subject to their rule. It was only the elderly and the women that were allowed to go to the market; the youths did not for fear of being killed or forced to join the deadly sect. We had to go to the market to sell our farm produce in order to have money to pay our dues to the sect members."

Not also spared were young ladies who were forced to get married to the sect members. "They gave us a rule that no girl above the age of 13 should be without a husband. Long before the invasion they had sent their men to warn us to marry out all the young women in our midst that if any is found without a husband that person will be forced to marry a member of the sect. We had no choice but to give them out to marriage. Every man in the area both old and young had four wives in a bid to stop them from possessing our girls. Still, it was not enough because most of our men had relocated to Maiduguri for fear of a possible attack. I felt for the girls because most of them were finally taken away since there was no husband. Personally I would have preferred to marry only one wife or at worst two, but I had to make them four. I kept them as my wives but treated them as my daughters", he added.

According to Umar, indigenes were expected to register and get an identity number which will be used as a pass at the sect's checkpoints. According to him: "I had to hide away my farmer's identity card to prove that I am not loyal to the federal government. The truth is that it is only the federal government that can defeat them. There is nothing like local vigilante in our area. They have slaughtered them all and collected their weapons. No one is allowed to keep any machet except the smallest knife for cooking. The hunters, who were still left alive, had given up their weapons including bows and arrows. They used to visit twice in a week to collect money and food stuff from us. You must have it ready for them or be killed. No one dared them; we were a little bit comfortable with the fact that they had not destroyed our own village ever since they took over Bama town. Although we agreed to their terms, we prayed in our hearts that President Jonathan will send the military to save us from them."

Also forbidden was any form of entertainment. "It is an abomination to gather in the village square or anywhere for any form of entertainment. You are either in your house or in the mosque praying for the salvation of your soul", he added.