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...Roads where kidnappings, robberies, accidents take lives daily

By KENNY ASHAKA

ONE Sunday afternoon in February this year, a Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN staff observing his leave in Lokoja drove past the Obajana junction on his way to Lagos through the Lokoja-Okene highway. It was quiet and serene as that area of the junction is usually on Sundays. But as he drove a few kilometres into the road, six stocky fellows who suddenly blocked the road with a rickety Nissan panel van confronted him. He did not realise that the men were armed robbers who had taken over the road to dispossess him of his valuables. One of the men,

brandishing a gun shouted at the CBN staff. The petrified man quickly opened his door and made a dash into the bush. He thought he was safe. But few meters into the bush, a member of the gang spotted him and shot him at point blank range. He died immediately and his lifeless body was dragged to the roadside and laid abreast his car.

A day after, along the same Lokoja-Okene highway, about six policemen were in a patrol van armed with guns, patrolling the area. As the cops were about moving to another spot, a volley of shots was released from behind them. It hit one of them, a 35 years old police officer. He was mortally wounded. He slumped, and died shortly after.

Twenty-four hours later, between Lokoja metropolis and Obajana junction, a commercial vehicle driver sped past the NNPC Mega station. It was a little after midnight. As he moved towards the junction, an oncoming vehicle flashed his lights intermittently, signaling there was danger ahead. The driver thought the flash was the normal flash by friendly colleagues. He was wrong. Minutes later, the driver and his passengers drove into the waiting arms of two heavily built young men who spoke Fulani language to the driver. Out of anger that the driver refused to reply in their language, the robbers made a large number of small holes in the car before dispossessing the passengers, some of who had died, of their valuables.

Sule Lazarus, a business man based in Kabba got his own baptism of fire mid-March after the Dangote Cement Factory in Obajana as he was heading to Abuja for a business appointment. The time was 2.15pm. As he alighted from his car to purchase something, two gentlemen dressed in caftan approached him. He was unaware of the men until he suddenly felt a pistol pressed to his temple. He was asked for the keys to the car. The two gentlemen entered his car, fiddled with it and sped off. A thick smoke trailed after them as the car moved on.

These gory anecdotes sound like plots in a movie. They read like pages lifted from a crime story. But this is no film, not fiction. It is a grim reality, a mirror image of most highways in Kogi State. It is a reflection of the degenerate state of affairs in the Lokoja-Obajana, Lokoja-Okene and Obajana-Kabba highways, all in Kogi State.

Like armed robbers, kidnappers also reign there

As armed robbers are having field days, so are kidnappers. They have virtually taken over the Obajana- Kabba road and have extended their activities to the Ajaokuta axis of the state. They are daring. They strike at any time; early in the morning; in the afternoon and also at night, shooting, killing and maiming their victims. The poor condition of the highways makes them death traps. Better stretches of the highways are ridden with potholes, a situation which, in most cases, forces motorists to use the shoulders of the road. Most head-on collisions on these highways are as a result of drivers trying to avoid the potholes.

In Kogi State, kidnapping has reached an alarming proportion. Traditional rulers, priests and judges are not spared. For instance, the traditional ruler of Elete community in Ajaokuta local council, Chief Ahmed Aminu Aku was kidnapped barely a week ago. *Saturday Sun* learnt that the Elete traditional ruler was on his way to honour an invitation in Okene when the kidnapping gang who are yet to release him intercepted his car. Last Friday, a kidnapping gang had abducted two judges whose names were given as Justices Aliu Okeme and Timothy Ali.

The Bishop of Methodist Church in Okun area, Bamidele Ibikunle was recently abducted along with his driver on his way to Lokoja. Bishop Ibikunle and his driver were abducted along Lokoja- Okene highway, two weeks before his inauguration as the pioneer Methodist Bishop in Okun area of the state. He spent 12 days in the den of his abductors and was released after paying a huge ransom. Bishop Ibikunle told a stunned audience during his inauguration at the Methodist Cathedral in Ife- Ijumu that he and his driver were forced at gunpoint to walk several kilometers into the forest and were kept at their den without food or water for several days. He said they were subjected to all manners of inhuman treatments, including sharing drinking water with the herds of their Fulani abductors.

The Prelate of Methodist Church in Nigeria, His Eminence, Rt. Rev. Uche who negotiated their release from the clutches of the kidnappers described the abductors as "mean, wicked and heartless." Uche decried the activities of the herdsmen who, he said, had taken to reckless criminality, saying if the Federal Government does not check them, they posed the danger of Islamising Nigeria.

Two brothers of one of the former Special Advisers to ex-governor Idris Wada, who would not want his name in print, were abducted in the same area where Bishop Ibikunle was kidnapped. The two young men were on their way back from a trip to Lagos where they had gone to purchase a Tokunbo car for their brother last November when kidnappers swooped on them at the Irepeni end of the Lokoja-Okene highway. For the two brothers, they thought they had fled to safety when they abandoned the newly purchased vehicle after a robbery incident. Unknown to them, three Fulani herdsmen appeared with AK-47 rifle, abducted them and marched them into the forest. Three days later, the kidnappers demanded for N100 million ransom each. Upon negotiation, the kidnappers urged the brother to bring the ransom to a certain place in Obajana.

On 12th January this year, the kidnappers struck at the Redeemed Church of Christ at a village in Kabba junction. Acting like members of a military force specially trained to make dangerous raids, the Kidnappers stormed the Church in broad daylight and forcefully took away the Pastor of the Church while in the pulpit preaching and in the full glare of his congregation. He was dragged to the nearby bush before he was taken away. They later demanded for a ransom of N10 million. This time, the abductors met a brick wall as authorities of the Church called the abductors' bluff, warning them to release the man of God or face the wrath of God. The threat paid off as the Pastor was released six days later.

The traditional ruler of Apaa village, an obscure community about 10 kilometres to Obajana was also seized early this year by eight gunmen suspected to be Fulani herdsmen while travelling to the next village. A ransom of N2million was demanded. *Saturday Sun* gathered that the community was only able to raise N150, 000 with which they succeeded in securing his release after four days.

Perhaps, incidents of abduction on the highways in Kogi State that generated so much outcry was that of a female Permanent Secretary of the Osun State Ministry of Finance, Mrs. Adebimpe Ogunlusi, her driver and one director in the state's civil service. They were abducted on April 22nd this year on their way to Abuja. However, they were released eight days later after paying an unspecified amount to the kidnappers. Nevertheless, few days after the release of the Osun State officials, two sports stars who were simply identified as the 'DNA Twins' were also kidnapped at the same spot. They were said to be returning to Lagos from Abuja where they won a laurel when they were kidnapped. They were released two days later, although it was not clear if ransom was paid.

The evil ones also operate as gangs

Scenes described above are commonplace in most highways in Kogi State. For residents of the state, particularly commuters on the highways, travelling along the Kogi State highways is like a stroll through areas ladden with landmines. It is akin to walking through the biblical valley of the shadow of death. The Lokoja-Obajana, Lokoja-Okene and Obajana-Kabba highways are full of dangers, evil and death. On these highways that connect the North to the South, anything can happen. And the worst often happen. Apart from the condition of the roads which are condemnable, activities of members of the gangs kill and maim the road users have conspired to make the highways in Kogi State prone to incessant attacks on travellers.

One of the victims who pleaded not to have his name in print told *Saturday Sun* that the Kidnappers operate as gangsters and that the kidnap and robbery syndicates consist of a large membership "with high connections." He said that most of the members are Fulani herdsmen whose accents and physical build are different from the typical Fulani man on the street. "We were held captive for about 14 days in a forest in Oshokosoko with well-organized syndicate members who are running eight hours shift with some coming in the morning, evening and at night. Oftentimes, they communicate in Hausa which I understand very well.

"I can tell you that there are some bad elements in the Police who give them useful information on targeted victims, giving them protection. They even have herbalists and marabouts whom they consult to know when it is safe for them to operate. For example, anytime there is a ransom to be paid, they seek for spiritual guidance to know whether the money is laced with juju or whether those bringing the ransom will pose a threat to them," he added.

Police fingered as accomplice

Example of police alleged connivance with kidnappers was the experience of one of the negotiators of a kidnap victim. According to *Saturday Sun* source, the negotiator was at the police station to inform the police about the agreed fee and actually wanted to pull a fast one on the kidnappers. One of the kidnappers later described who him, the clothe he was wearing and the car he drove to the Police Station.

But the state police command denied that they had anything to do with kidnappers in the state. The Police Public Relations Officer, ASP Willy Aya, dismissed the allegation as baseless, misleading and far from the truth. While acknowledging that the command had some challenges over the incessant crime rate in the state, the PPRO said the Federal Government had gracefully provided a helicopter, which is currently in the state combing the bush as surveillance against the Kidnappers.

He said the Kwara State APC Chieftains and the two judges who were kidnapped recently have been released, even though he declined to reveal if ransom was paid or not. The PPRO could not give statistics of the kidnap and robbery incidents in the state as he was said to be with the CP combing the bush for the kidnappers.

As it is, the highways in Kogi State have achieved the notoriety of roads under the gun. Guns rule the highways and motorists, commuters and residents live in mortal fear of the cold metal.

Recently, Kabba community relocated the Sango market in Odolu, based on reports that some herdsmen often hid inside the market to perpetrate crime. One of the Hausa community leaders said he ran into trouble after reporting certain people to the police who were accused of kidnapping. He said, but for God, the whole case was turned against him as the suspects, allegedly released by the police came haunting for him.

If this community leader is lucky, the traditional head of the Fulani in Oworoland based in Obajana and a member of the vigilante group were not as he was murdered recently in broad day light "for leaking the kidnappers' secret to the police." The Fulani head, popularly known as Ardo, Alhaji Ibrahim Isa Kurumi and one Idris Banshe, a Vigilante member, both reputed to be spiritually strong were murdered a fortnight ago. The Chairman of Miyetti Allah Cattle Rearers in Kogi State, Alhaji Abubakar Ibrahim Jalido said the killing of the duo has caused serious apprehension in the area and called on President Muhammadu Buhari to intervene.

Call on police for action

A rights activist, Idris Miliki urged the police and other security agencies in the state to double their efforts, saying there was no police check point on the Kabba-Obajana highway, yet the road is the most dangerous in the state.

A member of the National Union of Road Transport Workers, NURTW, Mr. Bode Ojo who plies the Kabba-Obajana road said some of the drivers had to go spiritual before daring to travel through the road. He alleged that when drivers make distress calls to the police and soldiers stationed at Obajana cement, they were always snubbed, saying, their duty was to protect Dangote facility but not motorists.

The Kogi State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists has also decried the rising spate of kidnappings in the state and urged the law enforcement agents to take decisive steps to nip the problem in the bud. In a statement signed by the Chairman of the council, Comrade Ali Atabor and the Secretary, Comrade Adeiza Momoh Jimoh, and made available to newsmen in Lokoja, the union expressed worry that kidnappers are in firm grip of the state and are operating with reckless abandonment.

IGP deploys helicopter, mobile force

As if responding to the people's outcry, the Inspector-General of Police (IG), Mr. Solomon Arase, has approved the deployment of a helicopter and more policemen to Kogi to checkmate the increasing rate of kidnapping and armed robbery in the state. The state governor, Alhaji Yahaya Bello, while addressing the newly deployed policemen in Lokoja on Tuesday, said the helicopter was for aerial surveillance.

Among the deployed policemen are members of the Special Anti- Robbery Squad and four detachments of mobile policemen and trackers. He said the police had been provided with sophisticated security equipment and that the helicopter had since commenced aerial surveillance of suspected criminal hideouts in the state.

Bello said that it was hoped that the incidence of kidnapping, armed robbery and other violent crimes in some parts of the state would soon become history.

He thanked President Muhammadu Buhari and the IG for their intervention. The governor said that kidnappers and other criminals would not be allowed to operate in the state as the security agencies had been directed to go after criminals and smoke them out from their hideouts.

He also said that local governments in the state had been directed to constitute vigilance committees to complement the efforts of the security agencies.

Bello said that the committees, to be made up of traditional hunters, ex- servicemen and other relevant groups, would assist in intelligence gathering.

He said the government would soon embark on some job creation programmes in agriculture to check youth restiveness and divert youths' attention from crime.

Bello promised that security of life and property would continue to be a priority to his administration and urged Kogi residents to assist by reporting suspicious movement and people promptly to security agencies.

Earlier, while presenting the helicopter and policemen to the governor, the Commissioner of Police in Kogi, Mr. Usman Yakubu, said a lot had been achieved in the fight against criminals since the arrival of the helicopter and policemen.

"With this helicopter, we can easily track down either kidnappers or robbers operating in the state. The aerial view gives us full details of the suspected criminals while operating," he said.

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