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The late Ibanga



Akwa Ibom CP, Zubairu Muazu

Woman killed in gun battle between police, hoodlums

— 1st August 2017

From Joe Effiong, Uyo

For about 30 minutes last Tuesday, the banking layout axis of Abak Road, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State was like war-torn Bosnia or more recently, Aleppo in Syria.

Sounds of AK47, or even more sophisticated weapons rent the air. Passersby and commuters caught in the melee scrambled for their dear life. Banks hurriedly closed their doors and sent their distraught customers into the street. The lucky ones were locked in for safety.

The police who usually guard the banks in the area had responded to the first shooting with more shooting. Thus the area became a theatre of war.

It was a baptism of fire for the state Commissioner of Ppolice, Mr. Zubairu Muazu, who just resumed duties that morning in the state.

Till date, no one has been able to tell a foolproof reason for the daylight gun battle or the dramatis personae who initiated it before the police responded. While one theory said some armed robbers were trying to rob a bank and started by firing into the air to foreplay terror, others said they had even robbed one of the banks and were only trying to shoot their way to escape. But the police said the initial shooting was done by rival cult groups before their men responded to dispel them.

All these appear to be mere conjectures.

But in the midst of the ding-dong and nebulous arguments, one thing was certain; a life was lost. A poor woman; a single mother of three who was on her way back from the day's hustle, was caught by a stray bullet and her remains are now lying stone cold in the morgue, leaving her three promising children to face the hardship of life alone.

Victoria Ibanga, who was a staff of Uyo Local Education Authority, was returning from work at about 3pm when the bus she boarded was caught in the theatre of the gun battle. While still inside the bus, a stray bullet hit her and she died few hours later due to lack of immediate medical attention.

Her children (two girls and one boy) will now have to struggle through life. The son, David Peter, 20, said his dream was to become an electrical engineer. If only that would come true now.

"Since I heard the news of my mum's demise, I have not been myself. I feel very bad. Why would she die now that I need her most? I have sat for JAMB exams this year and I want to get to the university to study electrical engineering.

"Life was already a struggle while she was still alive because my father had left her many years ago and she had to fend for us all alone. Now that she has died, how will I and my younger sisters survive? I am praying that the government and well meaning Nigerians will come to our aid," he said.

Recounting her story, the younger sister to the deceased, Ndukeabasi Usanga, said that the deceased who lived with her for about three years was her prayer partner. She said that nothing could be more hurting to her than her demise.

"My sister left home on Tuesday lively and sound to work. She was a single mother with three children. We were expecting her to come home to meet her children but up till 5pm, we did not see her. We thought she went somewhere. But before then, I spoke with her on phone earlier that day.

"I called her to get drugs for her first daughter because she took ill. I waited for her to return but she did not. By 6:03pm, someone called with her number and asked if I knew the owner of the phone and I said 'yes it is my sister's phone.' He said; 'Ask the person to come to Apico House to pick her phone.'

"I asked the man why the phone was there and he said that there was an armed robbery attack and that the owner of the phone must have run away leaving the phone behind. Later the person called again around 6:30pm to tell me that the person was yet to come and get her phone and that he wanted to leave the place. He is actually a police officer around that place," she said.

Usanga said she left to church hoping that the deceased might have gone somewhere that took her time. Her mother who is also leaving with her, called her at about 8pm to inform her that the sister was yet to return home.

She left church immediately in search of her sister. She said that she had visited several hospitals to see if she could find Victoria but unfortunately could not find any trace of her that night.

"I was on the road up till 10pm and in the process of the search, someone told me that one woman was caught by a stray bullet and was dumped by a certain gas station where people gathered to watch and that she was later put inside the mini bus in which in which the stray bullet had hit her and taken away.

Started the search as early as 6am the following morning. I went to hospitals I could not visit the previous day to continue the search. It was one of the hospitals that someone who my sister had been chatting with on Facebook, told me that she was there at the scene of the defence. She told me that I should go to Area Command to ask after for my sister," she said.

According to her account, when she got to the police station that she was directed to, she was told by one of the policemen that her sister was never brought there and was still breathing, but was sent to C Division since the case was not within the command's jurisdiction.

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That is how Nigerians, especially the police connived to play to play hide and seek with the life of the woman.

"I rushed to C Division that morning and I was showed the bus that brought her. I started searching the bus to see if I could find anything to identify that she was actually the one because up till then, I did not still believe that she was the one. When I saw her shoe, I said 'this is the shoe that she actually wore to work'.

"That's when I knew it was my sister indeed. So I asked the policemen to show me to where my sister was and they told me she was dead. I requested to see her corpse and I was told it was taken to the morgue. They however gave me one police escort in the vehicle I went with to take me to the morgue where my sister's body was dumped," she said.

Usanga however pleaded with the government and well meaning Nigerians to assist her sister's children through school.

"My challenge is the children that she is leaving behind. I pray that government should do what is necessary to ensure that the children are taken care of. They should continue their education," she said.

Whether it was cult war or armed robbery; one thing is sure, the hoodlums went away free without a scratch as none was wounded or arrested.

The state police relations officer (PPRO) Mr Ikechukwu Chukwu, who had earlier issued a statement to the effect that the shooting was a clash between some unnamed rival cult group, was later to lambasted social media bloggers who insisted that the shooters were armed robbers.

"To set the records straight and give a clear and correct picture of issues raised in the said online report, the Command wish to inform the public that there was no robbery attack on any commercial bank anywhere in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State. The incident that was erroneously referred to was a clash between rival cult gangs along the road which was promptly contained by the swift response of our patrol teams," he said in a press release.

Chuckwu equally told our correspondent on phone on Friday evening that so far no arrest had been made even as he confirmed Victoria Ibanga's death.

The State commissioner of police, Mr Zubairu Muazu, only assumed duties a few hours earlier that Tuesday had warned criminals to leave town because he had arrived.

"I am here to continue the good job my predecessor started in this state. We will ensure peace and security and will leave no stone unturned to ensure that the peace we restore is maintained.

"I advise all criminals to leave Akwa Ibom State if there is any. The Nigeria Police is ready to ensure that their activities are curtailed and we have all it takes to do that," he said.

Hitherto, Akwa Ibom was generally considered a state with the lowest crime rate in the South South and South East geographical zones. But in recent days, it seems it is tired of such dull title. With Ukanafun local government becoming a theatre of barefaced murder by cultists, who kill council officials, politicians and school teachers unmolested in broad day light, every other week, the new CP had better match his words with action, else criminals may rather run him of town, possibly, like his predecessor.

Last line: But if robbers, sorry, rival cult groups exchanged fire with the police and a woman was hit by stray bullet, from whose gun did the deadly slug fly out – that of the robbers, sorry, cultists, or the police? **END**

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