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Vigilantes in Niger leave trail of blood, tears

— 3rd September 2017

- 20 people killed in 6 months

From JOHN ADAMS, Minna

Peace seems to have taken flight for people in Niger State, leaving pain and agony in its place. This has been occasioned by the bestial acts of some persons wielding weapons and masquerading as local vigilantes, who, rather than protect the people against daredevil men of the underworld, have turned a nightmare.

From Minna, the state capital to Kontagora, Suleja, Rijau, Alawa and Banji, it is a tale of woe as residents narrate sordid acts and raw terror unleashed on them by members of various vigilance groups, who maimed or killed citizens over unsubstantiated allegations leveled against persons suspected to have committed a crime.

No fewer than 20 people have been killed in such cloudy circumstances between January and June, this year, according to reports. In each case, the victims were labeled criminals, adjudged guilty and given jungle justice.

Salihi Musa, a 32-year-old commercial motorcyclist, who came out of his home to ease himself about 1.00am one ill-fated night recently in Suleja, Suleja Local Government Area of the state, did not live to tell his story, after he was arrested by members of a vigilance group on suspicion of being a thief. He had taken to his heels on sighting them presuming they were armed robbers; but his plea of innocence after the men chased and caught up with him fell on deaf ears. At dawn, he was no more, brutally tortured to death. Salihi is just one among three victims of extrajudicial killings by vigilantes in Suleja within the past six months.

In Maikunkele, a suburb of Minna, four people were killed by the vigilantes in the area in March alone, among who were two suspected goat thieves. They died from injuries sustained from severe torture by members of the vigilance team. The incident triggered a protest by residents in the neighbourhood which almost turned violent before the situation was brought under control by the police.

However, the violence that erupted in Kontagora over the alleged killing of a 17-year-old boy claimed four lives including two vigilantes during a clash between youths of Angwan Yaman in Kontagora Local Government Area. The office and patrol vehicle of the vigilance group were razed by the irate youths, to avenge the death of the boy said to have been arrested while returning home late during the last Ramadan period, detained and viciously tortured at the vigilance office, which led to his death.

Irked by the incident, the youths mobilized to the vigilance group's office in protest, where the operatives were said to have fired gunshots sporadically into the air in a bid to disperse them. In the process, a youth was hit and killed by stray bullet, while several others sustained injuries, triggering a violent reaction from the protesting youths.

Also this year, precisely on May 5, members of a vigilante group at Alawa, Rafi Local Government Area, allegedly led by their chairman, Mallam Zakari Alawa, stormed a mosque in the early hours of the morning and whisked away six persons in a prayer session to an unknown destination. They have not been found dead or alive till date, amid reports that rather than handing them over to the police if a crime was committed, they had been extra-judicially murdered in cold blood. The victims included Abubakar Usman (60), Aliyu Usman (57), Budeiri Idris (25), Ahmadu Usman (35), Usman Usman, Abubakar Kadir (57) and Ilu Dere (25).

One of the victims, Abubakar Usman, was said to be in possession of a sum of N750, 000, meant for payment of his hajj fare on the day he was whisked away while another, Abubakar Kadir, had N30, 000 at the time of his arrest by the vigilance men, according to a petition to the Niger State police commissioner by relatives of the victims.

In the petition signed on their behalf by a lawyer, I.A. Adams, a copy of which is in the possession of *Sunday Sun*, families of the victims alleged that on enquiry about their whereabouts after being whisked away, the leader of the vigilance group, Zakari, claimed they had been handed over to a military formation in the state and demanded a sum of N700, 000 for their release, a claim that was debunked by the military authorities.

+ t of the petition reads: "Upon thus findings, our client believed that these people have been killed as usual by the vigilance men and their uses destroyed for no reason." The families have threatened to take the laws into their hands by resorting to self-help, to avenge the killing or their relatives if the authorities take no action to ensure justice.

Bala Elkana, a Deputy Superintendent of Police and until recently, spokesman for the Niger State police command, confirmed receipt of the petition and commencement of investigations when contacted on the phone regarding the development. He expressed concern over the activities of local vigilances groups, especially extra-judicial killings, for which he said the command had received several complaints.

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