

Benue unholy herdsman attack: Catholic church, natives count losses

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Eyewitnesses give graphic details

Murphy Ganagana, Rose Ejembi; Linus Oota, Makurdi

It was a well-planned mission, executed in the early hours of the morning with clinical precision. At about 6:00a.m on that fateful Tuesday of April 24, a group of over 20 heavily armed men suspected to be herdsman stormed Mbalom, a serene community in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State on an ungodly mission: to kill and desecrate the House of God.

With some of them half-masked and others clad in military fatigue, the marauders announced their arrival with a staccato of gunfire, shattering the innocence of the community at dawn. They had clear targets, which included the St. Ignatius Quasi Parish, a market square, and the venue of a funeral ceremony scheduled to hold later in the morning.

To ensure the inhabitants of the community do not decode an impending danger, they stealthily made their entry when darkness had not evaporated to usher in daylight at dawn, taking the residents unaware in their trademark fashion. Then, it was bedlam as sounds of their sophisticated weapons resonated in the air.

It was midway into the early morning mass at the church and Rev. Fr. Joseph Gor, the parish priest, who was undergoing a six-month agricultural programme at Akure, Ondo State, had asked Fr. Felix Tyolaha, his reliever, to conclude the mass.

Gor had prepared to set out to Ayer Mbalom, a nearby village to conduct a funeral mass, in company with the catechist of his parish, Mr John Ivor. They had barely stepped out of the church when the invaders pumped hot bullets on both of them.

While catechist Ivor was said to have died on the spot, the attackers presumed Gor dead and moved into the mass hall, where they sprayed bullets on Fr. Tyolaha at the altar. As the parishioners ducked for cover, the gunmen displayed their sniping skills, picking them out like games. “Apparently, the intention of the attackers was not to kill women; otherwise, they would have wiped out all of us because there were more women than men in the church that morning”, says Mrs Roseline Ivor, the slain catechist’s spouse, who witnessed raw terror.

“As a catechist, my husband usually went before us to the church every morning. That day, he left the house at 4:00a.m and I joined him later in church at about 5:00a.m; the

mass started by 6:00a.m. While the mass was in progress, because the church is an open hall, we didn't know when the herdsmen surrounded us. Some of them walked into the church, and straight to the altar. Then, they shot other people. There was commotion as people ran for cover, but I held unto my husband who had died on the spot and everything was just like a dream to me. I was right in the church when the attackers came. But miraculously I was not shot. I saw when my husband was shot. So, I ran to hold him; unfortunately, he died on the spot", she narrated.

When the smoke cleared, Fr. Tyolaha and catechist Ivor laid stone dead. Also dead on the spot was Mr Hyacinth Chia, chairman of the church committee, and two other parishioners. However, Fr. Gor was said to have battled with death for some time before he gave up the ghost, according to Cyprian Nyetayer, a witness, who offered help to save his life. He did not survive it.

"I was among those who carried him on a motorcycle to convey him to a hospital to see whether he would survive. While we were trying to lift him on the bike, we heard gunshots around the market square close to the church. It was at that point we left him and ran for cover. But the motorbike rider managed to put him on the bike and tried to take him out. Unfortunately, at a certain point, he gave up the ghost. He did not make it to the hospital".

When the gunmen were done with the church, they charged through the market square, shooting sporadically as they advanced to the venue of the funeral ceremony, where they showed no mercy as they killed and maimed. They also had no respect for the dead woman whose funeral mass was to be held for her interment. They hit had on the coffin and her body fell off.

When there was nobody in sight to kill, they vandalized the audio system and speakers mounted for the botched funeral ceremony, and returned to the church, marching triumphantly as they sang in Tiv dialect.

On arrival at the parish, they moved into the parish priest's office and performed a sacrilegious act. After grabbing the Holy Communion Sacrament and some bottles of Holy Communion wine, they ate and drank in merriment of their unholy exploits. When they eventually left, 19 persons had been murdered and several others injured.

Julius Achaku, village Head of Umenger, said the serial attacks by suspected herdsmen did not shock him. Two months ago, he got hints from a friendly herdsman on a planned attack on some villages, but was told not to worry. He took it as a joke and didn't report to the police; and barely a week after, his community and other neighbouring villages came under vicious attacks. Though lucky to be alive, Achaku is battling daily for survival with his large family as squatters in a relative's home. He is not in a hurry to return home, amid fears that the herdsmen were not done with the attacks allegedly launched through Awe

and Keana axis of Nasarawa State borders with Benue. “We had thought the Fulani were fighting for grazing land; they said they will take over Umenger, Daudu, Gbajimba and all the adjoining villages, and they are determined. Now, it has gone beyond what we thought, and we are now confused. Unfortunately, we are helpless”, he lamented as he narrated their ordeal to Sunday Sun last Thursday, in Makurdi, the Benue State capital.

For residents of Benue State, it was mixed feelings as the anti-grazing law, which seemed an antidote to the mindless bloodletting in clashes between farmers and Fulani herdsmen took effect on Wednesday, November 1, 2017. The Anti-Open Grazing bill passed by the state House of Assembly and assented to by Governor Samuel Ortom, prohibits open grazing of livestock in the state.

However, uneasy calm trailed its passage into law amid claims, counter-claims and subtle threats, as the state government constituted several committees at various levels to ensure its implementation. Suspense, tension and apprehension, however, pervaded the air as the law took effect. But victims and witnesses over the years, to horrific scenes of invasion by Fulani herdsmen in Tiv and Agatu communities in the state, had their fears. Indeed, there were ominous signs that their hope for reprieve from the menace of cattle herders was stuck in a delicate balance buried in the womb of time. Their fears seemed to have come to pass as herdsmen lay siege to the state.

Eyewitness accounts

Hon. Alur Jonathan, a former leader, Gwer Legislative Council, said that he was just waking up around 6:00a.m when he heard sounds of gunshots across the village.

“Initially, I ran back into the house and hid, but when the gunshots seemed to be moving close to me, I summoned courage and gathered my little children on my motorcycle and sped off. As I was going, just by a rail line crossing close to my house, I saw some of the gunmen across the rail. As soon as they saw me, they shot like three times at me, but miraculously, I dodged the bullets and escaped with my children.

“I was lucky they couldn’t get me because I was descending into a valley while the assailants were ascending a hill. So, that gave me an edge over them and I escaped into safety. One of the herdsmen that I saw across the rail was masked while the two others left their faces open, but I couldn’t recognize them. Based on what I saw, those attackers who opened their faces were Fulani, but I don’t know if those who covered their faces are not Fulani”.

How I lost my husband in the attack –Mrs Chia

Mrs Evelyn Chia, wife of Mr Hyacinth Chia, chairman of the church committee at St. Ignatius Quasi Parish, Mbalom, who was shot dead by suspected herdsmen, was still in

shock when our correspondent visited her in Aliade, where she is currently mourning her husband. Her 52-year-old husband had left the house that fateful morning for the Mass at about 6:00a.m while she picked her basin and strolled to the nearby stream to get some water.

“I was still at the stream when I heard sounds of gunshots resonated across the village. I quickly hid in the bush. After the gunshot sounds subsided, I came out from hiding and was running towards the church, which was a few yards from the stream. On the way, I first saw the corpse of the catechist, but I kept running towards the church, praying all along that my husband would be safe. Alas, as I got to the main door of the church, I found my husband dead in the pool of his blood.

The mother of six children, who wept uncontrollable, said she is now in a fix as to how to take care of the children her bread winner left behind since she is only a full time house wife.

She recalled that her last word to her husband who until his death was the Head Teacher of LGEA Primary School Ayar-Mbalom that morning was the usual good morning greeting.

“We only greeted good morning and he left for church while I went to the stream. I was planning to come back and make food for the family so that by the time he would come back from the church, breakfast would have been ready.”

Although, Chia’s widow said she had no premonition that any bad thing would happen to her family that day, their second child, 25-year-old Catherine said she actually had a premonition about the attack.

“On Monday, I just noticed that one of my eyelids was just shaking uncontrollably and consistently too. I kept praying in my heart that the Lord would ward off any impending evil from our family. I never knew that the attackers were already lurking in the area, ready to strike,” she said.

The church is in trouble –Rev Fr. Godwin

The Parish Priest of St. Augustine Quasi Parish, Umenger, Guma Local Government Area of Benue State, Rev. Fr. Tyagher Godwin, looking at what happened said: “If not that I’m a man of God, I would have said our people, our brothers and sisters, let them go and fight to defend themselves. Personally, if I have the opportunity of holding a gun, I will defend myself regardless of the fact that I’m a man of God. If you come to kill me, I cannot fold my hands to allow you kill me; I have to defend myself.”

He said that it has not been easy with them because the killing has continued, adding that all his parishioners have been displaced.

Fr. Godwin said that the incessant attacks have put their lives at risk, saying that “Catholic priests are at risk; they are now endangered species. We are in danger even though it is the first of its kind, but it has happened. Several crises have been on such as land disputes between farmers and the herdsmen, but a priest has not been killed; this is the first time in our area here. So, for me we are apprehensive and it is now like a Muslim and Christian thing; that is the way I look at it.”

He noted that the impact of the current attack was enormous, pointing out that it had affected the church adversely unlike what they had seen in the past.

His words: “The impact is much, like after the first crisis early January, it was 73 people, but what they have done now is even more than the people we have buried before. So, it has affected the church and now our people can no longer go to farm. Those rural areas like in Agasha, the place that you went, they attacked that place three times and people are moving from that place to Tarka Local Government; they can’t go to farm. Nobody can go to these rural areas because the Fulani are there, so it affects the church and very soon, maybe next year, we would not have food to eat. So, there is likelihood of famine. The local people are the ones that go to the farm and provide food to the priests and also sell farm produce to contribute money to the church. Since they cannot go to the farm, it affects the church. Coming back for us here in the town, things are not moving because the rural people are moving to join their relations in town and salaries are not being paid and there is no food. Even the IDP camps where government said they are providing food, not all is handed over to them. Some persons will maneuver their ways to take food out of those places and the people who are leaving in the camps are still suffering, so all these affect the church. Now, the church has taken it upon itself to provide food for those staying in the camps, because in recent times, the Bishop of Makurdi Diocese organised a mass for the refugees; he went there himself and said the mass at Daudu Camp, and he distributed relief materials to them. He also tried to provide education for those who lost their parents. The day before yesterday, the Holy Ghost fathers went to camp and donated relief materials. If there was no crisis, they could have used the money to develop the church. Now, parishioners are being killed and the church is in trouble.”