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## Lamentation of luxury bus operators: Armed robbers killing us, ruining our business

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**Members of the Luxury Bus Owners Association of Nigeria (LBOAN) are lamenting the activities of armed robbers along the Benue-Nasarawa highway.**

LBOAN has said that many of its workers have lost their lives while a number of others are currently nursing injuries following attacks by robbers and rogue security agents on the highway.

The group said its members' businesses are on the verge of collapse due to the incessant attacks and called on the Federal Government to provide adequate security on the highways, especially at night. The group warned that its members might be forced to block the highway with their buses to press home their demands.

The LBOAN members recently protested in Onitsha, Anambra State, over the killing of a bus conductor attached to Ifeanyichukwu Motors along the Benue-Nasarawa highway. The conductor was killed by suspected armed robbers in army uniform. They lamented that, in the past six months, more than 20 workers were lost, while over 50 others suffered bullet wounds.

The protesters, comprising luxury bus owners, drivers and conductors, numbering over 100, brandished leaves and placards, some of which read: "Federal government should provide security for us on the highways"; "Our businesses are about to close due to increase of attacks, killings of our drivers, conductors and passengers on the highways"; and "Stop killing drivers: enough is enough", among others.

The protesters marched from the Upper Iweka, Izuchukwu Park, through Northern Park to Lagos Park, in Onitsha. They warned that, if, after seven days, government failed to provide adequate security, particularly on the said highway, they would block some roads with their buses. The leader of the group and the national task force chairman of the association, Mr. Chigbo Emebo, and his South-East counterpart, Mr. Uchenna Maduako, wondered why gunmen wearing army and police uniforms always attacked their buses at checkpoints. They recalled that, within one week, there had been three robberies. The latest was on May 6, when the driver of Ifeanyichukwu Motors was stopped at a checkpoint and fired at. The driver's assistant was killed on the spot.

"The men who rob our buses always wear police and army uniforms. They kill our drivers, conductors and even passengers. We have been enduring this for long but it is now getting out of hand. Since this year, they have been robbing us on a daily basis between Benue and Nasarawa states. Many of our drivers have stopped working for fear of being killed.

"Three days before the killing of the conductor, they robbed and killed two passengers on FG Onyenwe Motors. The Federal Government and security agents should do something between now and next week. If they fail to provide us with security, we will proceed on massive protest; we will block various roads. We cannot afford to lose our livelihood; we are providing jobs for many people. There isn't any luxury bus company that isn't employing over 200 workers and you know what that means.

"We are also contributing to the revenue base of the country. We pay taxes and levies. We pay for our registration and licences. In terms of revenue and services, luxury buses rank after aviation. So, government should provide adequate security for us," Maduako said.

The group also expressed concerns over the activities of men of the Nigerian Customs Service on the highways, accusing them of always delaying their buses unnecessarily. They threatened that they might be forced to withdraw their buses from the highways. LBOAN chairman, Anambra State chapter, Mr. Edwin Anierobi, alleged that delays being caused by the Customs operators on the highways contributed to their drivers arriving at the black spots at odd hours. He called on government to do something about this.

"Our buses plying Sokoto, Jos, Bauchi, Gombe, Abuja, Yola and Kano, among other cities, are seriously being disturbed by Customs officials asking traders who come to Onitsha to buy goods for bribe before allowing them to proceed. If the traders fail to comply, they accuse our drivers of carrying contraband goods. Then they invent reasons to seize our buses.

"But are these not the same goods that were cleared at the seaports with the Customs before they were brought into the market for sale? Government should caution them on this; their conduct is affecting our business and our passengers. They have checkpoints at 9th Mile Corner, Obollo Afor and everywhere in Benue and Nasarawa states," he said.

The park manager, Chi-boy Motors, Mr. Joseph Ajagu, and manager, FG Onyenwe Motors, Aruna Ibrahim, said some of the armed robbery incidents were caused largely by the Customs delaying the movement of the buses. They also called on the Federal Government to tackle the problem.

The South-East zone manager of Young Shall Grow Motors, Mr. Kenneth Obianodo, in his remarks, regretted that many of their drivers had died, while others were nursing gunshot wounds that they sustained while escaping from highway robbers. He disclosed that many passengers had equally suffered the same ugly fate.

"There are robbers terrorising our drivers on the Benin Bye-pass, Benin-Lagos Road and the Benue-Nasarawa area. This occurs often. We complain to the police all the time, yet we don't get results.

"The Federal Government should, please, provide security on the roads because all road users' lives are at risk. When the drivers attempt to escape, the robbers always block the road and open fire on the vehicles.

"These days, our roads are bad and we have many vehicles plying them, leading to congestion. That is why some drivers and their passengers prefer to ply the roads at night; it is not for selfish reasons but because of the convenience that it offers the passengers," Obianodo stated.

Manager of Ifeanyichukwu Motors, Mr. Obinna Ihejirika, who lost one of his driver's assistants, described the incident as shocking. He said that when the driver saw the men in army uniform at a checkpoint he stopped, thinking that they were security agents. But they opened fire, killing the victim. He regretted that the driver never envisaged that the men were robbers.

"Last year, they shot our driver. Just last month, they also shot another of our drivers along the same route.

"Government should help us by providing security along that axis, unless they want us to stop plying the route.

"We have reported the matter to the police in the area where the incident happened through our office in Benue State," he said.

Chief security officer of FG Onyenwe Motors, Mr. J.O. Chukwu, a retired assistant superintendent of police, said he had been receiving reports of robbery attacks on luxury buses on the Makurdi-Lafia route, and the attackers always wore police or army uniforms.

"One of our drivers drove into them while attempting to escape. So, they opened fire, demobilised the bus and destroyed three of its tyres instantly. But the driver escaped. Other companies have lost many workers to the robbers too.

"We need to have police checkpoints along that axis, especially at a certain sharp bend after Lafia just as one progresses to Akwanga. Drivers are seeing hell there. Our security agents should mobilise to the area. We learnt that the robbers are always there between 11pm and 3am. They always dress like security men on duty, and when the drivers stop for routine checks, they rob the bus. They are fake policemen and soldiers. They should be traced by security agents," he said.

A driver attached to Our Saviour Motors, Mr. Onyeka Ugo, narrated his ordeal in the hands of robbers on the affected road.

"We were returning from Yola when robbers, using logs of wood, blocked the Gboko-Aliade road. But, luckily, I climbed the wood and escaped.

"On the return journey to Yola, again we met another gang robbing on the same route. Luckily for us, a police patrol van arrived. It pursued them and they fled. Then we escaped.

"We are begging the Federal Government to help us because we don't know who is who on that axis as both the robbers and security agents put on the same uniform. Our lives are always at risk, and some of us might be forced to quit this job," he said.



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