

Enugu community groans

•Man's alleged killing by vigilance group triggers violence, leaving houses, property worth millions in ruins

24th June 2019

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An attack on Aji, a community in Enugu-Ezike, Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State, has left the people in tears and sorrow.

Over 20 shops and many houses, including a petrol station, hotel, borehole and other property were destroyed allegedly by members of a nearby community, Ogrute, in retaliation for the killing of Chibueze Urama by the members of the Neighbourhood Watch, a local vigilance group in Aji community.

Before now, Aji and Ogrute, two prominent communities in Enugu-Ezike town, had a very cordial relationship with each other, even though another community, Imufu, separated the them.

Daily Sun gathered that trouble started when the Aji vigilance group arrested Urama, who had a patent medicine store at Imufu community, though he hailed from Ogrute. Sources told the reporter that Chibueze was mentioned as a receiver of stolen goods from a burglar from Aji who was earlier arrested by the group for burgling another patent medicine shop in Aji.

During interrogation, the vigilance men allegedly took the law into their hands and tortured Chibueze to death before they scampered into hiding. His death infuriated the Ogrute people and they came on a revenge mission.

When the reporter visited Aji within the week, the people wore mournful looks as the victims counted their losses. Some of the victims who spoke to the reporter alleged that the attack was a collaborative act between Ogrute people and other villagers who must have been nursing grudges over time against Aji people.

Those who spoke noted that no right-thinking person in the community supported the unwarranted death of the medicine dealer in the hands of the vigilance group. But they also condemned the actions of the mauraders, saying they wreaked havoc on the property of innocent residents who had no part in the activities of the vigilance group.

Narrating what happened to Daily Sun, James Odo, a renowned tailor who had a shop opposite the vigilance group's office, described the attack in the community as a war situation.

“Many fled their homes the night preceding the early morning attack. We were helpless because we never supported the killing of anybody in any form. It was like running for our lives during the civil war. Women and children, including the aged, also ran for cover. As we advanced into other neighbouring villages, those villagers also abandoned their homes and ran. When the dust settled the next day in the afternoon, the attackers left in their trail, tears and sorrows.

“My rental business was the first casualty. Men and boys in their numbers singing war songs invaded our community and set ablaze buildings and cars. They came with petrol, matches and other weapons and also used my plastic chairs, canopies and gallons which I hire out to people as additional fuel to ensure that those things they burnt were reduced to rubble,” he said.

Chinedu Adonu, whose family house was close to the office of the vigilance group, narrated how his family lost all household belongings in the incident.

“I wasn't at home when they invaded the community, but somebody called me on phone that our house was already on fire. I had to rush home. We tried to quench the fire to no avail. This is our family house, and my elder brothers, Okwudili and Okechukwu, were the worst affected because the fire started from their rooms and they were also not at home. Okechukwu's own room was even locked so everything inside was totally damaged. We had already run for our lives knowing that we were at great risk because of the closeness of our house to the security post. All the items we saved at home were also destroyed while looters also capitalised on the situation to steal people's valuables.”

Christian Abugu, a barber and disc jockey, whose shop and equipment were burnt, also gave a graphic account of what happened.

“What happened that day was pathetic and pains me to the marrow. Our attackers set the entire community on fire as if the entire community planned to kill their son. They came in great numbers as they pretended that they were coming for peace. But immediately they got to the boundary between Aji and Imufu, they started destroying houses

and people's belongings. They went from house to house but our people never raised any hand to struggle with them.

“If our people had put up a fight to defend their property, there would have been deaths of unimaginable proportion on both sides. I'm struggling here to survive and had never joined the vigilantes or any group disturbing the peace of anybody, but look at how they burnt all my life's struggles. I sourced for bigger sound equipment worth over N500,000 but everything is gone with the fire.”

Ifeoma Eze and Stella Adonu, whose shops were also burnt and goods looted, appealed to government and public-spirited individuals to come to their aid.

President-general, Aji Town Union, Chief Sylvester Ayogu, expressed regret over the whole imbroglio. He said efforts were made to forestall the reprisals when the unfortunate incident was reported, all to no avail. Ayogu noted that properties owned by Aji people in Ogrute, which included hotels, shops, borehole and cars, were also damaged before they proceeded to Aji to further vent their anger. He said that several follow-up efforts have been intensified since then to ensure that peace is restored between the two communities.

Traditional ruler of Aji, Igwe Simeon Osi Itodo, appealed for calm. While condemning the killing of the medicine dealer, he also noted that violence was not the best solution to the problem.

He commended Governor Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi for his prompt response to the situation by calling for an emergency meeting of stakeholders from both communities and the local government and also setting up a panel of enquiry over the incident.

“The governor's intervention by setting up an administrative panel of inquiry that had capacity to unveil the circumstances surrounding the killing and proffer solutions for everlasting peace in the entire Igbo-Eze North, not just Aji and Ogrute, is timely and the best solution to the situation. The governor is a man of peace who applied his fatherly role to quench the situation. Both Aji and Ogrute communities should be law-abiding and follow the instructions of the state governor,” he said.

Igwe Itodo urged both communities to embrace peace and called on the youths to desist from fanning the embers of discord through inflammatory comments on social media.

The traditional ruler of Ogrute community, Igwe Ogbonna Ekere, on his part, confirmed that the reprisals carried out in Aji community were not the action of Ogrute youths alone, saying it was with the connivance of other communities. He attributed the action to anger over past killings. He said he was happy that God had taken control of the situation.

He also expressed appreciation to Governor Ugwuanyi for undertaking to cushion the effects of losses incurred in the problem and expressed hope that the panel of inquiry would also come up with a lasting solution to the crisis.

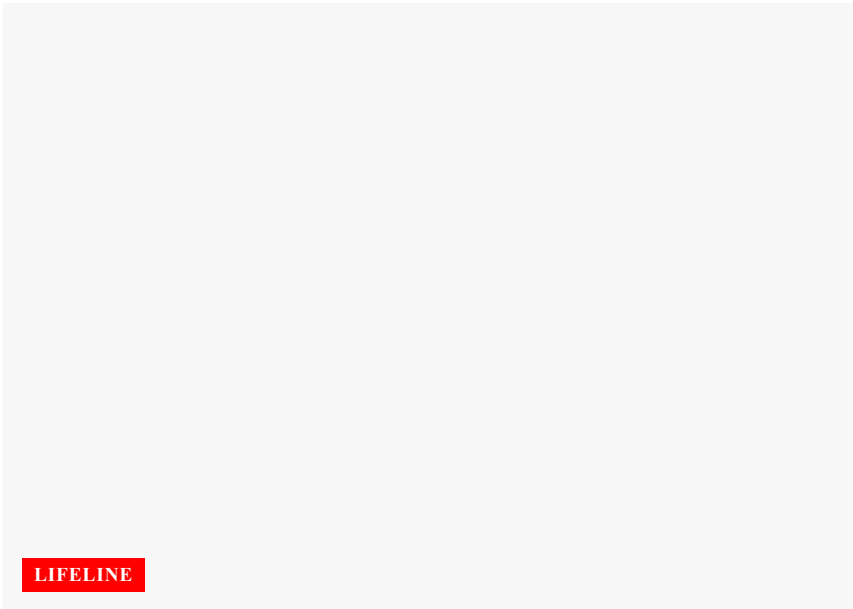
At the time of this report, the panel, headed by Goddy Ogbo, a lawyer, former commissioner and council chairman, had met stakeholders from both communities and also visited the family of the deceased.

A member of the Aji vigilance group has been arrested and handed over to the police, while a manhunt for the other fleeing members is still on.



Rapheal

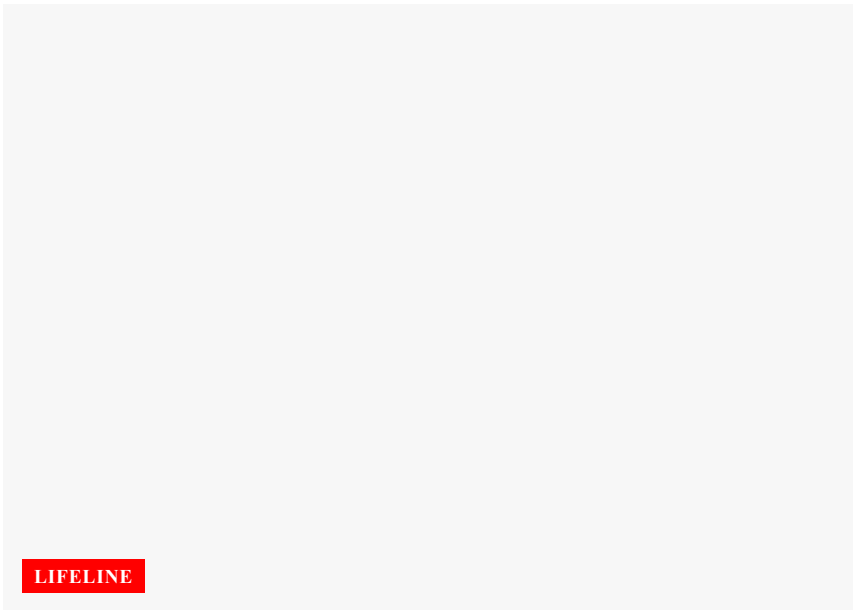
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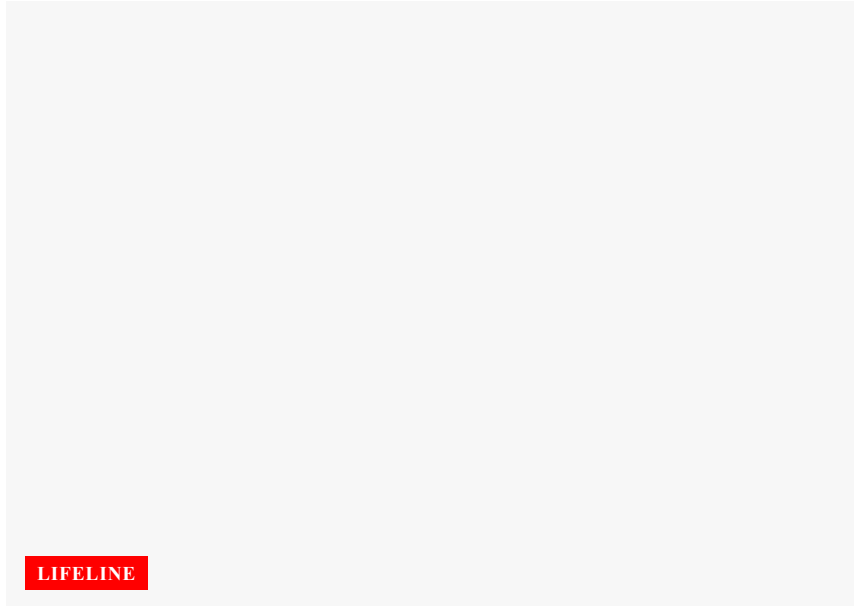
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