

# Cruel fate

► Plateau community mourns as bodies of sons allegedly murdered by military are given communal burial ► We want our husbands back alive -Widows ► Community heads to court

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**When the expected news did eventually come, it arrived with a reverberating shockwave. In our last story on the ugly development, *Saturday Sun* had reported wives of the Kwi community of Riyom Local Government Area of Plateau State, pleading with the authorities of the Special Task Force in Jos to release their husbands, members of vigilance group, said to be taken into their custody after they were critically wounded in a shooting incident by its operatives, about seven months ago. If you have killed them, bring their bodies for burial, their anxious families said.**

On Wednesday, November 13, 2019, that wish was finally granted after several months of anxious waiting. But it sparked off a gale of emotional outpourings as the three corpses of vigilante members allegedly killed by operatives of the Operation Safe Haven (OPSH), a joint military task force in charge of internal security in Plateau and environs arrived the village to be given a communal burial.

Most people, especially women and children could not hold back their tears when a siren-blowing ambulance arrived the village with the corpses from the Jos University Teaching Hospital (JUTH) where an autopsy was earlier conducted on the bodies to ascertain the cause of their death. Widows of the deceased, cried and wailed as they hugged the coffins tightly, as if doing so would wake up their dead husbands. It was a highly emotional sight. There were simply no dry eyes anywhere in sight.

The atmosphere was tense and chaotic as villagers voiced out their frustration, anger and sadness over the killing. They contended that these members who had made sacrifices over the years by sleeping outside in the cold in order to protect the community, ironically, along with members of the joint task force, from external aggression from Fulani herdsmen, did not deserve such cruel fate in the hands of their co-protectors.

### **Genesis of the ugly episode**

Their untimely death followed an attack allegedly carried out on April 20, 2019, by suspected Fulani herdsmen operating from a forest close to the village. They were said to have targeted and laid ambush on two members of the community who were returning from an outing somewhere. While one of them who is said to be a brother of the members of the village vigilance group died in the attack, his partner survived. Though seriously wounded, he was able to alert members of the vigilance group of what happened. It prompted them to rush to the scene in an attempt to rescue the situation.

But, alas, that attempt to rescue the distressed turned out to be a grave miscalculation providing a chilling background to more gruesome bloodletting but this time around perpetrated not by the much-talked-about and feared Fulani herdsmen but by members of the joint task force charged with protecting the community from attacks. Stories had it that members of the vigilance group mobilized to the ambush scene, the military guys who were also alerted by the village head about the ambush as the group were, met one dead body and the survivor, on their arrival.

The incident was at bout 8 pm. Shortly afterward, military operatives arrived the scene in a Hilux van and met 17 vigilance members who ordinarily, should be no strangers to them as they had been working together over the years to keep the small community safe from attacks by marauders. But nobody knows why they behaved the way they did in the ensuing moments. Up till today, nobody has been able to establish whether it was the case of a mistaken identity that took place under the cover of darkness. And, nobody knows what the rule of engagement or mode of communication between the two groups was like before the bloody encounter. Members of the joint task force were alleged to have opened fire on members of the vigilance group, without any provocation. In the ensuing chaos and confusion, three of them were critically wounded before the sound of military-issue rifles died down.

Eyewitness said the military operatives, for reason best known to them, started shooting directly at the vigilantes who were there on a rescue mission, without bothering to find out whether it was friend or foe that was on the scene. Although the sporadic shots took everyone by surprise, by the time it was all over, three members of the vigilance, namely Elisha Yakubu Bot, 47, Joshua Dung, 27, and 24-year-old Bot Bulus Rwang, were critically wounded.

Maybe comprehensive enquiries into the matter which the community and its lawyer are calling for may eventually get to unearth the true motives behind the attacks. But one fact that the community holds up to accuse the operatives of the Joint Task Force of pre-meditated murder is their hasty round-up of the 17 vigilantes, including those inflicted with gunshot wounds, and framing them for armed robbery.

Subsequently, they were taken to Sector 9 Command Office in Makera, Riyom. While on the way, the three who were badly injured were allegedly taken to the hospital while the remaining 14 were taken to Makera. The following morning, they were transferred to the STF Headquarters, Jos where they were reportedly tortured for about a month before being handed over to the State Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Plateau State Police Command. Having ascertained that they were not criminals as was originally assumed but members of vigilance group responding to attack, they were freed after some days after their statements were taken by the police.

### **How the tragedy unfolded**

Following an alarm raised by the community that 17 persons were arrested that fateful night but only 14 were released, some of the community leaders including the member representing Barkin-Ladi in the State House of Assembly, Hon. Peter Gyendeng approached the Commander, Major General Augustine Agundu, to ask for his intervention in the matter but he couldn't explain the whereabouts of the missing three.

The community wrote an official letter to the STF Headquarters to produce them. They got no response. Not even when this was followed by another letter. Following this development, the community engaged the services of a lawyer, Barrister Gyang Zi to write a letter to the STF Headquarters, demanding to know what happened to the vigilantes in their custody. Yet, they got no response.

When they appeared to be making no headway, the three affected families mobilized themselves, in conjunction with the community and constituted a search team who moved round hospitals in Jos. It was in the course of this that the corpses were discovered in Bingham University Teaching Hospital Jos in August, five months after the incident.

Shocked, the community through their lawyer, wrote the hospital demanding to know who deposited the corpses and when that was done. They also approached some pathologists at the Jos University Teaching Hospital (JUTH) for autopsy. But on the day of burial the hospital management refused to release the corpses until the community

settled the mortuary bill of over N250, 000. Matters were later straightened out when they made a part payment through their lawyer.

### **Reality dawns on the widows**

The widows and community members will forever remember November, 2019 as the month in which the bodies of Elisha Yakubu, Joshua Dung and Bulus Bot were given community burial. Widows, women and children couldn't hold back their tears when an ambulance arrived the village, bearing the corpses.

Martha Elisha, mother of six and wife of late Yakubu found it difficult to believe that her husband was gone, never to be seen again, never to spoken to anymore. She said the whole thing seemed to her like a movie. She couldn't believe all the stories being told about her husband being dead until she saw the ambulance arrived in the community. With tears streaming down her cheeks and dripping on her chest, she called on the Federal Government to intervene and investigate the cause of her husband's death and the two others who also lost their lives in the senseless shootings.

"We are asking for justice," she told *Saturday Sun* amid tears. "How can people who are paid to protect the citizens turn around to start killing them? Government must look into the issue critically and bring back my husband. How that will be done is their business."

Recalling with much pain how the sad incident happened, she said: "It was on Sunday April 21, 2019 at about 8pm. I called my husband to know where he was and he told me that they were called and asked to go to the forest to help some people who were attacked. When he got to the scene, he called to inform me that one person was killed while one survived. As they were trying to rescue the survivor, the military stormed the scene and framed them as armed robbers and arrested them. I was calling him on phone to know how they were doing but he didn't pick my call. Since then I did not know his whereabouts until when the corpse arrived the village for burial. I won't accept this."

The story of Nzem Dung Joshua, 18-year-old and pregnant, is not in any way different. Nzem, a mother of one said she was at home that night with her husband when the call came for him to join his colleagues to render help to the victim of the ambush on the scene of the attack. Her words: "When they called him that night, he reluctantly left for the place but he couldn't come back home. I tried his line severally but it wasn't going through. I couldn't sleep that night. I was praying that nothing should happen to him. But look at it today. The corpse is here for burial. We need justice; we need to see our husbands alive."

It is a grief that is shared by Peace Bulus, the 19-year-old pregnant wife of Bulus Bot. A mother of one, like others, she is also demanding to have her husband back to her alive. "It is a sad story for me to hear that my husband is dead," she said. "He left home peacefully that evening but he couldn't return home alive. They went to save some people who were under attack but unfortunately they turned out to be the victims. I have been suffering with this

pregnancy and taking care of the baby. To eat is a very serious problem; I can't bear this burden. Government should intervene and bring back my husband alive."

### **A survivor's tale**

A survivor of the bloody incident, Madaki Shedrack narrated how it happened. "We went for the wedding of our brother at Wereng village but as we were coming back, somebody called me and said they have killed his brother in the forest," he recalled. "And being a member of the vigilance group in the community, I called some of my colleagues because I can't go there alone. We were 17 in number who went to the scene and we saw the corpse.

"I advised that since the incident has happened, we should carry the dead body and go home. It was not up to two minutes when the military boys arrived the scene. They didn't find out what happened. They started shooting directly at us and bullets hit three people among us. We wanted to run but we discovered that three of our members had been shot. There was no need to run. They arrested 17 of us and took us to Sector 9 in Makera, from there they took us to STF where we spent one month before we were taken to State CID. We were carried in one Hilux and when we got to Maraba Jama'a, 14 of us were taken to Makera. Until now, we didn't know where three others who were injured were taken to. The corpses that we have here belong to people that were shot."

### **A community leader reacts**

A community leader and former Commissioners of Finance, Plateau State, Hon. Davou Mang gave an insight into how the corpses were discovered. His words: "After men of the Special Task Force, took away the 17 people, we were trying to find their whereabouts the following day. We couldn't locate them until after some days. We discovered that 14 people were transferred to State CID. We followed up with the CID and they told us that it is 14 people that were handed over to them and they don't know where the other three are.

"We decided to engage our lawyer, Barr. Gyang Zi. We wrote the military authorities to tell us where the three people are. They didn't reply. We went again with member representing Barkin-Ladi in the State House of Assembly and we met with the Commander but nobody could tell us exactly what happened. After thorough investigation, the police discovered that the people were at the scene to render assistance and that they were vigilante. They were released but we couldn't see the remaining three. The military authority refused to tell us their whereabouts. We heard rumour that they were injured and taken to hospital. We were trying to find out which hospital they were kept when the community mobilized and went on a search. Around August, we discovered that the dead bodies were taken to Bingham University Teaching Hospital.

"With the intervention of our lawyer, it was discovered that the military authority brought them to the hospital on the 21 April 2019. They didn't tell the hospital what happened. The corpses were just dumped in the hospital and

they didn't inform the community. These military boys were staying in the community. But two days after the event, they packed their things and disappeared from the community unceremoniously.

“Our lawyer wrote that the hospital management that we want to take the corpses for autopsy, we engaged Pathology at the Jos University where the autopsy was carried out to find out the cause of death. We told Bingham University Teaching Hospital that the corpses are not unknown. They are not criminals. They are not armed robbers. They are community members who are vigilante and we have been looking for them. The hospital released the corpses and we paid some money through our lawyer.

“The pathologist has carried out the autopsy and the result is with the lawyer. We have written several letters to the STF and up to now we have not received any response. We want to find a closure to the issue. We have to find out what happened, who took the corpses there, under what circumstances and we will take a decision with our legal team.” He vowed to explore all avenues to search for justice on the matter.

Efforts made to speak with the spokesperson of the Operation Safe Haven (OPSH), Major Shittu Adebajo, were not successful as he did not respond to calls made to his phone. When journalists approached the Commander of the OPSH, Major General Augustine Agundu on the issue, he also declined making any comment.



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