

▸ SS3 student beheaded, community mourns

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SHARES VIEWS

Chijioke Agwu, Abakaliki

The receding tension at the boundary communities between Ebonyi and Cross River states over protracted land dispute seems to be rising again following last week’s gruesome killing and beheading of a 17-year-old boy, Friday Ojoko, from Ndinwampfu village, Igbeagu community in Izzi Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

The deceased was reportedly beheaded by suspected warlords from Ukelle in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State while returning from the farm with his parents.

Until his gruesome murder, Ojoko was a Senior Secondary 3 student of Noble Secondary School, Ndiechi Igbeagu, Izzi.

The people of Igbeagu community of Ebonyi State and their neighbouring Ukelle of Cross River State have been at war occasioned by boundary dispute since 2005. The dispute had led to bouts of intermittent bloody clashes and destruction of

property on both sides.

Search for peace

There had been several peace talks and moves by the governments and people of both states on how to find lasting solution to the crisis.

For instance, in 2018, an Ebonyi State Government delegation led by Governor David Umahi met in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, with their Cross River counterparts led by Governor Ben Ayade, in search of amicable solution to the age-long crisis.

At the end of the meeting, both states made numerous resolutions and thereafter signed an agreement to end hostilities.

However, more than a year after the Port Harcourt Accord, governments of the two states are yet to implement many of the issues contained in the agreement. This prompted youths from some of the affected communities in the two states to come together and initiate another peace talk.

Coming under the umbrella of Ebonyi and Cross River Youths Peace Ambassadors, the youths lamented that they had lost numerous lives and property to the war, stressing that they were ready to make any sacrifice to ensure the conflict ends.

They, therefore, appealed to the federal government under the watch of President Muhammadu Buhari to help end the conflict. The group further extended their plea to governors of the two states, Ayade and Umahi.

Leader of the group, Pascal Nnaji Nwenyi, a legal practitioner, while addressing the paramount ruler of Obubra, Ovarr Cement Ewonar, during one of their peace meetings at his palace, disclosed that youths from the two warring communities of Ukelle in Cross River and their Igbeagu neighbours in Ebonyi had resolved to adopt any conflict resolution methodologies in settling future differences that may arise between them.

He stated that on no account will they resort to bloodshed or destruction of property in resolving any misunderstanding between them again.

He said: “That we apologize to the Almighty God, the Governments of Ebonyi State and Cross River State and above all the government of Federal Republic of Nigeria led by President Muhammadu Buhari for the war we waged against ourselves which we saw as unholy.

“We regret all our actions and promise that this despicable action can never repeat itself again.

“Also, we have realized our inadequacies and agreed to lay down our arms and promise to be absolutely peaceful, law abiding and to co-exist harmoniously.

“Again, all the differences ravaging some of the boundary areas of the two sister States shall from henceforth be resolved through conflict resolution methodologies.

In continuation of their search for enduring peace, youths from various warring communities in the two states including Igbeagu, Okpitumo, Enyibuchiri, Adadama, Ojon, Ukelle, Ukwu Mango, Ohana Edda and others, last month, led a delegation to Ebonyi State Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, Chief Samuel Okoronkwo, in Abakaliki.

Speaking shortly after the meeting, President, Ebonyi/Cross River States Peace Development Movement, Nwenyi, told newsmen that the visit followed a town hall meeting aimed at improving common understanding among the two states. He appealed to the two state governors to give them the opportunity to present to them their findings that would engender permanent peace in their boundary communities.

According to the youth leader, “We have gone very far trying to achieve peace within the two states which is the reason you are seeing youths of the two states after our meeting paid a visit to the commissioner.

“As the youth we are moving in line with the elders and the general public but the real challenge we are having is mobility to go to the hinterlands so that we can meet more population of the youth so that we can address these insurgents and on how far we have gone, we have been able to stop shootout and have been able to open all the traversing roads in the crisis area that connect the two states and we thank God that generally, normalcy is now returning to various areas.

“We are appealing to the two Governors to come to our aid; to give us their support so that finally we can achieve this peace to its barest minimum. Every Local Government Area, community and villages of the warring area is properly represented in this group and we have been presenting our cases and I can say that peace is quick returning to the zones because what we hear now is merely not coming on expected day of.

“Also, we are urging the two Governors to give us the opportunity of addressing them so that we present to them our problem and they know how to address them, as well, called the National Boundary Commission to take advantage of the already resolved peace and know if there are some or part of their work remaining in those zones that they go and complete them for permanent peace.”

Renewed hostility

Their efforts were yielding results as critical stakeholders from the two states were beginning to join them, but the recent killing of the school boy appeared to have threatened the peace efforts of both the government of the two states and their youths.

Village head of Igbeagu community, Chief John Ede, lamented the killing of the teenager, adding that it has made them to begin to have a rethink about the ongoing peace moves.

He stated that on that fateful day of December 7, 2019, Ojoko was coming back from the farm with his parents and siblings when the assailants ambushed them.

He said that the victim and his family members, upon noticing the presence of the armed men at a particular spot, had become apprehensive and picked race but following the hot chase given them, Ojoko was caught by the assailants while the rest escaped.

According to him, some stakeholders in the community had alerted the military team at the checkpoint along the expressway immediately news of the incident filtered into the village, who swung into action in search of the boy and in the process, his lifeless body was found without head.

Ede said the villagers had been going about their legitimate businesses since they were informed of a peace deal that was established through peaceful negotiation by youths and elders of the two warring communities.

In fact, the village head said they were persuaded to lay down their arms, that the rival Ukelle warlords had accepted to make peace, but unfortunately, it appeared to be a mere decoy to attack and kill them again.

“When the information came that members of a family from our village were attacked that evening, we informed some stakeholders that contacted the military checkpoint at Ipolo area who helped to trace the victim but found him already beheaded.

“It’s really shocking to us because we were directed to ceasefire over the boundary dispute which had lingered for years with the assurance that our opponent had already opted for peace negotiation; we heeded to the advice but to our consternation, the same Ukelle people came back and killed our son,” he said.

Commenting on the killing, traditional ruler of Igbeagu Autonomous Community, Eze Ogbonnaya Ukwu called on stakeholders of Ukelle community to fish out the killers of the school boy and hand them over to the law enforcement agencies for immediate prosecution.

He also urged his people not to go for reprisal stressing that the killers might as well be instigators who would not want enduring peace between the two states.

Meanwhile, his counterpart of Ukelle Community declined to speak on telephone having said that he travelled to Abuja, but promised to reach us later.

Regardless, another community leader in the area, Isaac Okpokpo, confirmed the incident on phone. He said that he got the shocking news and quickly summoned meeting where he was told that boys from a particular village known as Okpodon allegedly perpetuated the dastardly act.

Although Okpokpo said he was not in the community at the time of the call but he confided in us that the youth chairman of Okpodon village had been arrested until he presented the two boys allegedly behind the killing whom he claimed had fled the village.

According to Okpokpo, the youth chairman had told him that the boys were hired by Fulani herders who asked that they escort them to Ndinwampfu to trace their allegedly missing cows. He said that on getting there, they found a man with his family who in sighting them raised alarm that attracted some warriors from Igbeagu area that engaged them in gunshot which resulted in the killing and decapitation of Ojoto.

He assured the people of Igbeagu that the already established peace would not be betrayed by the boys as the Cross River State's peace team would do everything within its power to arrest and ensure the prosecution of those involved in the crime.

Attempts to get reaction from Ebonyi State Police command were not successful.