

- How farmers'feud claimed lives • 80 houses destroyed, many injured, scores missing
- Monarchs speak, say communities not at war

---

16th May 2020 *in*

0

SHARES    VIEWS

### **Jeff Amechi Agbodo, Onitsha**

**The farmers of two agrarian communities of Omor and Umumbo in Ayamelum Local Government Area of Anambra State were recently at daggers-drawn with each other, leading to wanton killings, abductions, and destruction of property worth millions of Naira.**

This followed their clash over ownership of land allocations of the farmland located at a cluster of Lower Anambra Irrigation Project (LAIP), divided into E71, E72, E8, E9, and E10. The farmland under contention was acquired,

some years ago, by the federal government for irrigation farming.

### **Genesis and aftermath of clash**

Sources said the plots were originally allocated to Omor farmers by LAIP who reportedly paid for the plots, with receipts, but farmers from Umumbo community in 2019 went and cultivated the land. This marked the beginning of the crisis in which truth now seems to be the first casualty as there are many versions of, and claims in the story.

In one of the versions, Saturday Sun gathered that the current trouble started when Omor farmers last week went to the land said to originally belong to them to begin the process of cultivation by spraying the place with chemicals. But they were challenged by Umumbo farmers and this led to a bloody clash between them. Another version said that the portion of the land under contention was owned by neither Omor nor Umumbo but allocated to the farmers by LAIP authorities on first-come-first-served basis.

It took the quick intervention of the Speaker of the State House of Assembly, Hon. Uche Okafor, who is from neighbouring community of Ifitte-Ogwari in the same council area to bring calm to the flammable situation. He reportedly stormed the area in the company of heavily armed military men and mobile policemen

Investigation by our correspondent showed that four persons from both sides lost their lives during the fracas. Their names were given as: Sunday Emeke Chukwuemeka, Onyebuchi Simeon Ananti, Ikegnunam Nweke and Jideofor Nweke. Others sustained various degrees of bodily injuries and are said to be receiving treatment. In addition, some people whose number is yet to be ascertained as at the time of this report, are said to be missing. They include a 78-old-man, Mr. Chukwudelu Uchegbuo. Houses numbering about 80 and vehicles were said to have been destroyed in the two communities.

### **Monarchs speak on the cause of crisis**

Speaking on the matter, the traditional ruler of Omor Community, Igwe Dr. Oranu Chris Chidume, condemned the killings, abduction and destructions occasioned by the clash. He said that, contrary to media reports, the people of Omor and Umumbo communities are not, in any way, at war with each other. The crisis arose, he said, from farmers at the clusters of E71, E72, E8, E9 and E10 who were contesting the land allocations.

The Igwe admitted knowledge of the undercurrents long before they snowballed into a full-fledged bloody fight. “This matter came to my knowledge in January 2019,” he said. “I personally took it upon myself to ensure that the clash was nipped in the bud by raising a committee from Omor Royal Cabinet to mediate on the matter and to ensure that the issue did not snowball into major crisis. With that and other preventive measures we took, we were confident that the matter had been resolved.

“Unfortunately, I only got to know that the matter was still on when, on May 5th, 2019, we received reports of fresh crisis resulting in abduction, killings, and destruction of property. Sadly, lives have been lost. Some people are still

missing while some sustained different degrees of injuries during the skirmishes.”

Insisting that human life is sacred, he admonished the indigenes of the two warring communities to desist from further action that will breach the existing law and order. He asked the aggrieved among them to always seek redress using appropriate channels and legal process rather than resorting to self-help.

He appealed to the government of Anambra State to look into the root cause of the matter to determine the issues surrounding the allocations, streamline the relationship between the host communities and the Lower Anambra Irrigation Project (LAIP) authorities and find a lasting sustainable solution to the crisis.

In his remarks, the traditional ruler of Umumbo Community Igwe Simeon Chidubem said that the crisis was between farmers over farmland at the cluster and not a boundary issue as alleged, noting that Omor and Umumbo communities are not at war.

But he denied knowledge of any committee set up to resolve the issues involved, as claimed by his counterpart from Omor, Igwe Chidume. “As an Igwe, I’m not aware of any committee set up to resolve the farmers crisis in the past,” he said. “Who constituted that committee? If there is any committee in that respect, it could be private arrangement they did at that time between the farmers they had issues with and not Umumbo affair.

“But I need to state that the crisis is not a boundary matter between the two communities. The problem is that there are some clusters where farmers are farming at Lower Anambra Irrigation Project which covers 790 hectares with 31 turnouts. The plots of land where the problem emanated from is at E7 and E8 area of the farm clusters where farmers from Umumbo and Omor farm. The land allocation was not permanent allocations but renewable each year on the first-come-first-served basis.”

He placed the cause of the bloody clash squarely at the feet of LAIP authorities who he accused of being in the habit of doing contradictory allocations of the clusters of land under contention. “If you ask me, I will reliably tell you that the people who caused this problem is Lower Anambra Irrigation Project authorities because they do double allocations of the farmlands,” he said. “A farmer will get receipt for a plot of land. Before you know it, another farmer will get the same receipt for the same plot of land.”

Like his Omor Community, he also claimed some form of intervention in the matter. “It was on May 4, 2020, that the farmers had misunderstanding at the farm but when I got the information I asked our farmers to go home,” he said. “Then on May 5, when the farmers went to the farm as they were about to start ploughing, some men from Omor ordered them to stop work and pushed them away and destroyed some of the farming instruments.

“They rushed home to inform other youths in the community who followed them to know what was happening. That was when the chairman of the council called to inform me and I ordered my people to go back but Omor youths followed them into our community and this led to the fight. Hoodlums cashed in on that to cause mayhem.

That was the issue between two or three farmers having problem among themselves which would have been resolved.

“On the first day of the crisis, a boy was killed. On the second, another person from Umumbo living in Omor was killed. That first day they attacked our community, they injured many people and destroyed many buildings and vehicles. Some people are missing. The houses destroyed in Umumbo are up to 80. In fact, all the buildings built by Umumbo people in Omor were destroyed.”

All the same he is thankful for the semblance of peace which the communities enjoy for now. “Peace is returning now because the stakeholders in Ayamelum LGA waded in and went to both communities to clamour for peace,” he said. “Myself and Igwe of Omor are also clamouring for peace. I want to commend the security agents for their prompt response in quelling the crisis.”

### **Farm leader’s angle to the story**

Giving some insight into the cause of the bloody clash, the leader of the farm cluster, Mr. James Nnonye, said that the problem started last year when some farmers from Umumbo went to cultivate other farmers’ plots, following which he said a committee was set up to resolve the matter.

“The Lower Anambra Irrigation Project (LAIP) is sited in Omor and the large expanse of land was owned by Omor while the smaller parts were owned by Umuobom and Umurum before the federal government took over the land for irrigation project after paying compensation to the original owners of the land,” he explained.

“The semi-permanent farmland allocation was done in 2005 which was allocated in batches to people of Omor, Umumbo and others. The farmland under contention is located at Isiokwe and Orencha in Omor and the owners have the receipts for payment of the farm plots from LAIP.”

He said that all the efforts, processes and avenues used to ensure that the matter was settled amicably were jettisoned by the Umumbo farmers, leading to the recent clash.

“We have been cultivating the farm peacefully without any problem until last year when farmers from Umumbo went and cultivated in plots of Omor farms which was mediated and settled by committee set up to resolve the problem, and resolution was reached,” he said. “Part of that resolution was that Umumbo farmers should not farm again in Omor plots after they harvested their crops last year.

“But this year, farmers from Omor the original owners of the plots went ahead to cultivate the land in order to stop the trespassers from going back there to farm on it but the farmers of Umumbo stopped those who went to plough and spray chemical to the land. This led to the fight at the farm and which later escalated. The youths hijacked the situation and started attacking anybody in the farms, streets, destroying property and leading to the killing of two persons from Omor. They injured others while some are still missing in Omor.”

## **Committee chairman weighs in**

The Chairman of Committee set up to mediate in the farmers conflict in the farm cluster said that the clash wouldn't have occurred if the Umumbo farmers had kept to their agreement with the committee. He said that the six-man committee which was set up at the instance of Justice Okonkwo who is an indigene of Umumbo community, was out to resolve the matter with three from each community.

Okolo who is also former Transition Committee of Ayamelum LGA said that after the meeting with the farmers and the committee members, there were resolutions reached which mandated the farmers from Umumbo to pay N12, 000 to Omor farmers who they took their plots, being the amount for each plot and to vacate the land after harvesting their crops. They allegedly reneged on this agreement and that led to the crisis.

He said: “We resolved that Umumbo farmers who encroached on Omor farmland at the cluster should pay them N12, 000 per plot which is usually the amount for a plot. We also said

that Umumbo farmers should pay for expenses already incurred on the plot by Omor farmers, like ploughing, fallowing and chemical grass sprays. That Umumbo farmers should vacate the plot after harvesting their crops for 2019 season. That if any of the farmers felt that there was an anomaly on the way the allocation was done by the authority, he should go to court and seek redress and not take law into their hands through violence.

“After the agreement, everybody accepted and agreed on the resolutions but the farmers of Umumbo, after harvesting their crops not only refused to pay the amount according to the agreement, they went back to the plot to start farming on it again this year. That's what caused the recent crisis. Had it been they obeyed the agreement, this crisis wouldn't have happened.”

## **Police issue statement**

Meanwhile, the Anambra State Police Command announced that the situation had been brought under control as policemen and other security agents had been drafted to the communities to maintain law and order.

The State Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) Mr. Haruna Mohammed, said that, contrary to claims and reports, only one person lost his life in the clash while four persons sustained injuries. He said that eight suspects were arrested.

A statement issued by the command read: “A peace meeting was held at the Local Government Secretariat, Anaku in Anyamelum LGA. The meeting comprises of the Speaker, Anambra State House of Assembly Hon. Uche Okafor, Transition Committee Chairman Mr. Benjamin Onyeabo, Representative of the Commissioner of Police DCP Chris Owolabi, Chairman Anyamelum Traditional Rulers Council and Igwe of Omasi Igwe Benjamin Okejie, Igwe of Omor Chris Chidume, Igwe of Umumbo, Simeon Chidubem and Igwe of Ifite Ogwari A I. Ofuebe.

“Other stakeholders in the peace meeting includes Rev. Prof. Benjamin Eboh, Chief Paul Odembo (Secretary SEMA), President Generals of Omo and Umumbu Communities, Representatives of the Army, DSS, NSCDC and the Divisional Police Officer of Anaku Division Mr. Victor Osuasa.”

### **Anambra State government reacts**

In addition, the state government had directed the security agencies and the Anambra Vigilante Group (AVG) to arrest everyone involved in the conflict and to bring him or her to justice.

The Commissioner of Information and Public Enlightenment Mr. C. Don Adinuba in a statement said that those involved in the crisis would be arrested and subsequently prosecuted in the law court regardless of their status in the society.

“The Anambra State government notes with profound sadness the conflict between the people of Umumbo and their neighbours in Omor community, Ayamelum Local Government Area, over land ownership which has resulted in one confirmed fatality and the destruction of valuable assets in both places,” he said. “Security agents drawn from the Nigeria Police Force, the Nigerian Army and the National Security and Civil Defence Corps have since been drafted to the scene to stabilize the situation and maintain law and order.”

### **Land allocation authority says no comment**

Efforts made by our correspondent to get the reactions of the Lower Anambra Irrigation Project (LAIP) authority proved abortive as the Project Manager, Mr. Friday Egwu, refused to speak on the matter when contacted on the phone. “You know that as a civil servant, I am not allowed to give such information,” he said. “You better reach out to my MD for his reaction.” But all the phone calls put across to the Managing Director of the Anambra River Basin Development Authority were not responded to.