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Outrage in Plateau communities over death of two youths

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There is outrage in two communities in Plateau State. The residents are in pain following the death of two youths, Rinji Peter Bala and Choji Jonathan Musa, which took place May 12.

Rinji was a 300-Level student of the Department of History and International Studies, University of Jos (UNIJOS). He was arrested and allegedly shot dead by military operatives, codenamed Operation Safe Haven (OPSH) on Zaria Road, Jos. Plateau State.

The second deceased, 24-year-old Choji, was a musician. He was said to have gone for swimming in a pit dug by PW Nig. Ltd at Dandyes, Chugwi Community in Vwang District of



Jos South Local Government Area (LGA), but never returned alive.

The deaths of the two once agile youths have thrown the communities into mourning. Sympathizers have been trooping into the family compounds of the deceased to mourn with them. The bereaved family members have cried out their eyes. The families of the duo are devastated with the sad end of their children, especially as they were the only male children and firstborns in their respective homes.

As the people are yet to come to terms with their deaths, they keep asking what and who are responsible and why the two were abruptly cut short, as well as demanding urgent answers at the same time. The entire communities are united in grief and in seeking justice for the departed.

Many of the embittered residents attributed Rinji's death to the negligence of the Operation Safe Haven personnel.

On the other incident, the community members believe that the death of Choji has to do with the manipulations of witchcraft.

It was gathered that Rinji, alongside his friends, left home in the evening of that fateful day, but were arrested by the security personnel as a result of the COVID-19 curfew imposed in the state.

According to eyewitnesses, the soldiers picked Rinji and six others in their Hilux van and moved them to Sector One Headquarters of the Operation Safe Haven, Zaria Road for preliminary investigation.

It was further learnt that five of the seven persons who were arrested, were interrogated and released after some hours. They were said to have been ordered to run out of the premises, only for one of the operatives to allegedly open fire on them, leaving Rinji dead.

When Rinji's father, Mr. Peter Bala, who is a security personnel, was contacted and told of his son's arrest, he dashed to the Sector One Headquarters where he met his son's lifeless body in the pool of his own blood. The corpse was recovered and taken to the mortuary at Plateau Specialist Hospital.

Pained by the circumstances that led to the undergraduate's death, the residents have since been advocating a thorough investigation into the matter with a view to bringing the culprits to book.

Bala has been speechless and finding it difficult to accept the reality that his beloved son was gone forever. He has apparently not recovered from the shock of his child's demise, even as he has not come out to say the next line of action he would be taking. However, different people have indicated interest to champion a legal action that will bring the culprits to face the wrath of the law.

The Commander of the Operation Safe Haven, Major General Chukwuemeka Okonkwo, has condemned the act of his personnel, even as he has taken and took responsibility of the incident.

The command, in a statement signed by the media officer, Major Ibrahim Shittu, regretted the death of Rinji, who was shot by its personnel.

He said: "Operation Safe Haven regrets the unfortunate death of a civilian by name Mr Rinji Peter Bala by its personnel.

"At about 10pm on 12 May 2020, information was received on the activities of suspected armed robbers and cultists operating around No 18th Street, Jos South LGA of Plateau State. The report revealed that the criminals took advantage of the lockdown and curfew to perpetrate crimes.

“Consequently, Sector One patrol troops of OPSH swiftly responded and arrested seven suspects, which were immediately moved to the Headquarters Sector 1 for preliminary investigation. Thereafter, five out of the seven suspects were cleared and asked to leave the premises.

“Unfortunately as they were leaving the premises, one of the personnel on sentry duty mistook them for escaping suspects. Thus, he opened fire on them, which led to the death of Rinji.

“A thorough investigation is on-going to unravel the circumstances surrounding the incident. Meanwhile the MOPOL personnel involved in the incident has been arrested and detained accordingly.

“Operation Safe Haven has condemned the sad incident. Representative of OPSH has also visited the parents of the deceased to commiserate with them. OPSH also assures the general public of justice.”

Also perturbed by the unhealthy development, the governor of the state, Simon Lalong, has expressed shock and sadness over Rinji’s death. Consequently, he has directed that thorough investigation be carried out to unravel the circumstances surrounding the killing of the young man. He assured the family that those found culpable would face the law of the land.

He expressed gratitude that the security personnel, who is alleged to have been involved in the incident, has been taken into custody for further investigation. He appealed for calm as he commiserated with the Balas.

Similarly, the Deputy Chairman, Senate committee on Defence, who is the Senator representing Plateau North, Istifanus Gyang received the killing of Rinji with rude shock. He described both Rinji and Choji as very promising young men with bright future.

He joined others to urge the Plateau State Police Command to thoroughly investigate Rinji’s killing, stressing that he was a young man with high prospects.

He frowned at the reports of extra judicial killings across the nation, where trigger-happy security personnel acting outside of clearly defined rules of engagement, terminate the lives of citizens with reckless abandon.

“I am aware that all arm-bearing personnel of the military and paramilitary agencies are expected to exercise due diligence and extreme caution in handling the weapons in their possession with the ultimate intendment to secure and safeguard the lives and property of citizens.

“Any abuse and misuse of arms by law enforcement agents that results in the killing of law abiding citizens becomes unacceptable and the perpetrators must be made to face the full wrath of the law to serve as a deterrent to others,” he stated.

Choji was said to have come home from Abuja, where he worked before the COVID-19 total lockdown, and was trapped at home. He went to the relaxation spot with many of his friends for swimming and to seek fun.

It was gathered that most of them usually went to the relaxation centre in the evening with children from different parts of the district. It was gathered that they had been cautioned to stop patronising the scene.

It was revealed that Choji went to the spot on that fateful evening with his friends. Getting there, one of them dived into the water and came out at the other end. Almost immediately, another followed and came out successfully. But when Choji went in, he couldn’t come out. Not sensing any danger, his friends waited for sometime thinking he would come out soon, but the waiting went on more than necessary. Then panic began to set in.

At that early stage, some of his friends were even cracking jokes, wondering why would Choji deliberately remain inside the water for so long. At about one hour later, it dawned on them that Choji had drowned. They did all they could but his body remained untraceable. They raised the alarm which attracted a crowd of people to the scene.

The family brought professional swimmers, but he could not help the situation until three days later when the lifeless body was swept to the shores. It was wrapped for burial immediately.

The councillor representing Chugwi Ward, Bitrus Bok, described the incident as unfortunate and painful. He said that it was one death that brought the entire community to its knees.

He sympathized with the family, the community and urged the people to trust in God for comfort. He prayed for Chugwi and asked God to avert a recurrence of such tragedy in the community.

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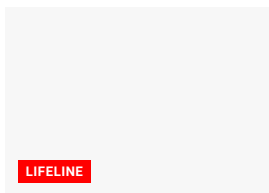
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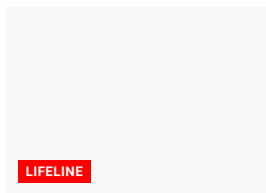
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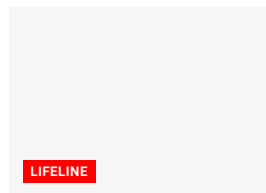
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