

Elusive peace in Ebonyi

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Barely two weeks after the Ebonyi State government thought it had perfected ways of mitigating communal clashes induced by land disputes, crisis again ensued between Nguji Ojiegbe Onunwakpu and Ndiegede, in Igbeagu autonomous community, Izzi Local Government Area.

At least two persons were feared killed and property worth millions of naira destroyed in renewed boundary disputes in the area. Investigations showed that the boundary disputes started in 2012, but were resolved by the state government.

Both villages had been laying claim to the disputed land, although the people of Ndiegede were first accused of encroaching on Nguji Ojiegbe's portion of the land and thereafter claimed ownership.

Commissioner for Internal Security, Border Peace and Conflict Resolution, Stanley Okoro Emegha, announced the strategy that government would take over any disputed piece of land, if the contenders failed to embrace peace.

At Ndiegede Community Primary School, where he addressed residents, he cautioned them to embrace peace or be prepared to forfeit the land to government.

He also warned the villages not to trespass on the said land until government concluded its findings. The commissioner was represented by the head of department in the ministry, Ifeanyi Igurube. He gave a warning that anybody found going contrary to the directive would be arrested and prosecuted for breach of peace, noting that the ministry would employ advanced mechanisms to ensure peace in the area.

He said, acting contrary to the government's directive by further engaging in any form of altercation would make government take over the land: "Every activity already taking place in the area should, henceforth, cease, until government resolves the matter and whoever trespasses in the land will be arrested.

"If you people fail to obey the order, government will be forced to take over the land. If you refuse to make peace, government, through the Ministry of Agriculture, will take over the place because every piece of land is

owned by government.”

Chairman of Izzi LGA, Paul Ugbooke, advised the people to embrace peace and obey government’s directive, as development would not thrive in an atmosphere of rancour and bitterness: “I beg you people, from today that government visited this portion of land, which has been causing misunderstanding, shun every form of commotion and accept each other like before.

“We do not want to hear about any crisis here again and that is the reason I want you to accept peace. I can recall vividly a similar problem within the neighbouring community, where government seized the contentious swampy land till date.”

The traditional ruler of the community, Eze Ogbonnaya Ukwa, praised government for intervening in the dispute. He urged the people to accept the peace initiative: “I appreciate the government for its intervention because we have on several occasions waded into this matter but all to no avail. We are appealing that the commissioner uses his good offices to create a demarcation that will serve permanently for both villages.

“If the disputed area falls entirely in favour of Ojiegbe, it will be taken in good faith, if it is the other way round, it will be accepted too because all we want is for the two families to live in peace.”

Special Assistant to the Governor on Special Projects, Prince Richard Idike, Technical Assistant to the Governor on Internal Security, Border Peace and Conflict Resolution, Pascal Nwenyi, and Coordinator, Izzi Development Centre, Beatrice Eze, all commended the state government for its prompt intervention in the matter.

They urged the people to appreciate the concerted efforts of Governor David Umahi, tasking them to channel their energies into agricultural activities rather than indulging in unnecessary struggle for land.

Leaders of the contending villages lauded the peace initiative of government and pledged to abide by the decision. Ojiegbe village head, Chief Innocent Igbahu, his Ndiegede counterpart, Chief Anthony Nwazunku, a youth leader, Comrade Ogbonna Nwogha, and another stakeholder, Okemini Nkwuda, all spoke with one voice.

The visiting government team was conducted round the disputed land by elders of the two villages. They appointed 12 men apiece from both sides to further meet and cement the peace initiative.



Rapheal