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Revelations from the police show that the gang is well-organised. While Ebenezer and members of his gang roamed the streets seeking whom to kidnap and ask for huge sum of ransom from, thereafter, his father, Fabian, and mother, Happiness, served as their armourers, who kept their weapons from time to time, to stave off suspicion and prying eyes... Fabian's younger son, Victor, 18, served as their most trusted and dutiful courier who helped to transport the arms and ammunition from one place to another, without raising eyebrows. Ogechi, Ebenezer's wife served as their accountant and cashier who collected, kept and distributed the ransom cash, according to directives given to her. Kennedy Okwuonu, their son-in-law, provided the gang with hard drug as well as other logistics.

ash coloured RX300 Jeep for all the operations.

## Police raid that ended their career

But they were all rounded up recently when a security operation led by Linus Nwairi (Superintendent of Police) and Commander of Imo State's Anti-Kidnapping Squad burst the kidnap gang's activities. The Igbo say that what a bird sang while it was out there in the air enjoying its freedom is not what it will sing when it is caged in captivity. So, it is with Ebenezer and his gang. Now in police custody, following the raid and arrest, and under investigations, they have all begun to sing like canary, to explain how culpable or otherwise they are in the things they are being accused of.

The Imo State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Isaac Akimoyede told *Saturday Star* that Ebenezer and his gang members kidnapped over 40 victims in the course of their criminal career said to have spanned about two years. Some of their victims include: Dr. Lewis Nonye Obodo, 50, of Mgbala Agwa Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State; Inspector Oscar Mbani, 40, of Agwa Oguta LGA, Imo State; Chigozim Festus Nneji, 39, of Ekwelu Atta Njaba Local Government Area of Imo State; Anyanwu Amarachi, 30, of No. 76 Lobo Street Owerri, and Desmond Okonkwo, 38, of Nnempi Oro West Local Government Area of Imo State.

He explained that they came forward to identify the notorious kidnapper, after he was arrested by Nwairi and his operatives, on July 28, 2020, in his house in Owerri. During the operation, the operatives recovered N4.2 million cash from him and his wife, right in their house. They also recovered four AK-47 rifles, 120 rounds of 7.6mm live ammunition, and Lexus 330 SUV with Reg No EDO URM 404 EL. One of the most celebrated of the cases in which they were involved was the killing of a Nigerian Drug and Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officer in Imo State, Uwakwe Celestine Amaechi Chukwu, 34, on May 15, 2020. They gunned him down in cold-blood and severely wounded his colleague, during a shootout.

But when operatives stormed their camp located in a thick forest in Omoku, Rivers State, they recovered the gun snatched from the slain NDLEA officer. In all, the haul of recovered arms include: four AK-47 rifles, one light assault rifle (LAR) and one submachine gun belonging to NDLEA. They reportedly combed the forest for four days and it led to the arrest of the other gang members.

## Ebenezer's account of involvement

In a chat with *Saturday Star*, Ebenezer, said: "I attended Central School Awara, I dropped out in Primary 3. Thereafter I learnt electrical work. My elder brother, David, was an armed robber/kidnapper. I joined his gang until he was arrested in Lagos State. He is currently serving prison terms at Kiri Kiriri Maximum Security Prison. He handed over the leadership to me and I formed my own gang and served as the operational commander and an executor for the gang. I started operation in September, 2019. Since then, I



SUSPECTS AND THEIR WEAPONS OF OPPRESSION

have kidnapped over 40 victims.

"I kidnapped victims even on Sundays. On May 13, 2020, we kidnapped two victims, husband and wife at Amakohia flyover in Owerri. The wife raised alarm. At Orji road junction, we saw two NDLEA officials. I killed one of them and seriously injured the other. He dropped his gun and ran. We carted away the rifles - a submachine gun and one light assault rifle. We escaped with the kidnapped couple and took them to our camp. We collected N1.8m ransom."

On how his wife, Ogechi, got involved in the kidnapping business, he said: "I got married to my wife, a graduate, by lying to her that I am a banker and oil dealer. It was in April, 2020 that my wife discovered that I am a kidnapper. All the same, she joined me in the operation. The ransom we collected from victims ranged from N1.5m to N3m. It was my wife's duty to come to our camp in Omoku to collect the ransom and share the money to my gang members and use the remaining for our capital projects. We are building a house in Awara Ohaji in Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State.

"My father, Fabian, is my armourer who kept for me some of my AK-47 rifles. Anytime, I went to the village, I do give him between N20, 000 and N30, 000. My younger brother, Victor, always receives two guns to take to the village and he would hand them over to my mother, Happiness, who was also my arms keeper."

The chat swings to the role of Pastor Agu and he confessed that he always prayed for them whenever they went for operations. "He gives us drinks to take in his shrine and after taking the water drawn from his shrine, no bullet would penetrate us. Whenever we collected any ransom like N7 million, the Pastor would come to our camp to collect his share - sometimes N500, 000 and sometimes N900, 000, depending on the amount of money we collected from victims. Pastor Caleb visited us at Omoku to motivate and give us some charms to help us overcome our enemies. I was arrested when operatives stormed my house at Work Layout, Owerri. They arrested me and my wife who is currently seven months pregnant. I have confessed to police detectives my criminal activities in various states."

## His wife's account of participation

His wife, Ogechi, 30, took over the narrative as she told *Saturday Star* her life history: "I attended Community Primary School, Naze, and from there proceeded to Community Secondary School, Naze in 2009. I read Accounting at Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri, Imo State. I graduated

in 2018. But for COVID-19, I was supposed to go for NYSC in August 2020. I met my husband, Ebenezer and we had courtship for about two months. We got married in 2019. He told me that he was a banker and also engaged in oil deals. I didn't know he is a kidnapper until April this year when I listened carefully during his discussion with his gang members. I confronted him afterward. I moved my luggage out of his house and went to stay in my sister's place in Owerri. I didn't tell my parents what I was passing through. He came and pleaded with me and my sisters. I am already pregnant for him. I moved back to the house and we started living as husband and wife.

"I didn't inform my father-in-law too that his son is a kidnapper. But I didn't know that everybody in my husband's family is a kidnapper until we were all arrested on July 28, 2020. It was a big shame for me. I cannot even understand the mystery of life. I started to visit my husband in the camp at Omoku in Rivers State and collected ransoms like N2m, N3m, N7m and shared the money to other gang members and used the remainder to continue the project we are doing in our village. My husband spends two weeks and sometimes, two months in the camp at Omoku depending on the activities going on."

Giving further insight into her life, she said: "I attend Winners Chapel on Port-Harcourt Road, Owerri. I am a protocol officer/usher. I hail from Oganima Awara Ohaji Egbema. I listen to the word of God in church. I never thought my husband and I can be arrested, until July 28, when we were both arrested in the house. I am seven-months pregnant."

## A father's part in the infancy

Fabian, said: "I am a farmer by profession. I have eight children, my first son, David, is an armed robber and a kidnapper. But he is currently in Kiri Kiriri Prison, Lagos. My second son, Ebenezer is a kidnapper who always keeps his AK-47 rifles in my custody. My wife, Happiness, also keeps guns for my son. He used to give us N20, 000, N30, 000 depending on his capacity. My fourth son, Victor, is an errand boy who collects the gun from Ebenezer and brings it to the village for my wife to keep. Police detectives arrested and recovered from us some rifles which prompted my wife to run away from the house. It is a shame that all my family members are kidnappers including, my daughter-in-law. We thought we were enjoying the money until we were arrested."

## How I became a gun

## courier - younger brother

Victor, 18, said: "I attended Central School, Awara, and proceeded to Great King and Queen International School, Orji, Owerri. I am in JSS3. It was my brother, Ebenezer who is sponsoring my education. I know that he is a kidnapper. He always gave me AK-47 rifles to take to the village and I usually hand them over to my mother to keep for him."

Agu, 42, the "anointed" Pastor, told *Saturday Star*: "I hail from Umuoni Agwa in Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State. I am the Founder of Excellent Jesus Ministry. I attended Umuoni Primary School, and later proceeded to Agwa Secondary School. I attended School of Theology but I didn't finish. I am a prayer warrior. I met and knew Ebenezer where he used to sell Indian henns and one day he told me that his business was not making much progress. I prayed for him. Later, I got to know that he is a kidnapper. I became his spiritual leader and director of the gang."

"I do visit them in their camp in Rivers State. I used to pray for them and often go there to collect my own share of ransom: sometimes N350, 000, N900, 000 or N700, 000. I do give them charms and hot drinks to take so that whenever policemen shot at them, they would not die. I always took them to my shrine inside my church where I live and do some incantations for them to succeed. Immediately they come back after operation I would collect my own share. My wife, Favour, is an evangelist in the Apostolic Church in Anambra State. I have seven children."

But he narrowly escaped death when the youths of his area got to learn about his true identity, a man they had supposed to be a man of God and respected as such. "The youths in Agwa wanted to mob me when the Anti-Kidnapping operatives arrested me in my shrine," he said. "They know me as a pastor, it was when the youths learnt that I am part of the kidnappers that they became angry."

## More suspects' confessions

Another suspect, Ikechukwu Njoku, said: "I am the protocol officer and a boy to Pastor Caleb Agu. I used to 'bike' (transport) victims through the track road to the point of pick-up at the creek. I didn't know Pastor Caleb was a member of the kidnap gang until he sent me to give fuel to Ebenezer and his gang members. That time they were stranded along Port-Harcourt Road, with kidnapped victims inside their car. I gave them the fuel and it was that day that I knew that Pastor Caleb is a member of the gang. He didn't give me kobo (a dime)."

Kennedy Okwuonu, 40, who hails from Onicha in Obingwa Local Government Area of Abia State explained: "I am Ebenezer's-in-law. I do provide the gang with hard drugs as well as other logistics at the camp in Omoku, Rivers State."

## Victims' accounts of ordeals

All said and done, people, especially the victims, are happy, that, at last, nemesis has caught up with this gang which once made their lives miserable. In interactions with *Saturday*

*Star*, they heaved a sigh of relief at the development. When our reporter visited the NDLEA office in Owerri and spoke with its state commander, Mr. Jack Inam, he did not hide this fact: "I and the entire command are in happy mood over the arrest of the killer of our staff. He was killed on May 15, 2020, during an official assignment with the Imo State 'Operation Search and Flush' team. He was killed by Ebenezer and his gang members. When the incident happened, I visited the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Isaac Akimoyede. He gave me the assurance that they would arrest the perpetrators."

"On July 28, 2020, the members who were arrested confessed to have killed an NDLEA official during their operation. The Anti-Kidnapping Commander and his operatives recovered the officers' rifles from them. I realized that the death of my gallant officer was not in vain. I want to thank the Nigerian Police. We will continue to partner them, being the mother of all the security agencies. The deceased officer was buried on June 13, 2020 in Enugu Ezike, Igbo Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State. We are grateful to God."

A kidnap victim, Dr. Lewis Nonye Obodo, 50, who hails from Mgbala Agwa Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State is also happy over their arrest. His testimony: "I attended Central School for my primary school education, Holy Ghost Juniorate, Isiala, for my secondary school and Abia State University Umuia, for my university education. I graduated in 1996 in Optometry. I am an accomplished medical practitioner, businessman, politician and philanthropist. At present, I am on the governing board of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH)."

"On July 19, 2020, I was kidnapped at the inland Road Alanchawa at about 7:45pm. I was in the company of friends when we ran into the kidnappers. They shot into the air to scare away people and used the opportunity to kidnap me and my friends. They took us to an unknown destination. After we got to their camp, they tied me up and beat me to the state of coma. It was Ebenezer and his gang members that kidnapped us. They started calling my relations to bring two hundred thousand dollars. Later they insisted on them bringing the money in pairs. They collected N7.5 million from my relations. They picked up the money in the bush where they asked them to drop it. They threatened to kill me. I spent nine days in their captivity. I was panicking as to whether I would be allowed to come alive after the ransom had been paid. But as God would have it, they later released me."

*Saturday Star* gathered that Ebenezer and his gang members had been terrorizing people for some time now. At a time, their activities prompted the immediate past governor of Imo State, Chief Ekeke Ikediora, to launch "Operation Iron Gate" to go after them. But when Governor Hope Uzodinma came in, he gave a marching order to the Commissioner of Police, Mr. Isaac Akimoyede, to go after the kidnappers. It was Operation "Search and Flush" which was launched after the marching order that led to the arrest of the notorious gang which will soon be charged to court after police investigation.