

#EndSARS: How peaceful protest turned violent, bloody

■ The pains, anguish, gains ■ We're not done yet –Youths ■ How various states managed protest

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For about 14 days, youths in several parts of the country, mobilised and motivated by the #EndSARS campaign, engaged in peaceful protests, demanding that government should take necessary steps to end the reign of police brutality. But on Tuesday night the peaceful nature of the protests was burst when a detachment of soldiers attacked the protesters, firing hundreds of rounds of live ammunition at the unarmed youths, who were holding various sizes of the Nigerian flag and chanting

the national anthem at Lekki tollgate in Lagos State. An undetermined number of the protesters were shot dead and several others sustained various degrees of gunshot wounds and other injuries in the resulting stampede.



Just as social media provided oxygen that sustained the campaign, the attack by the soldiers was captured on multiple video footages shared on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, and the live reports went viral, prompting nationwide and global condemnation.



Until the peaceful atmosphere of the protest was ruptured by the ill-advised attack by the soldiers, hoodlums and miscreants who had infiltrated the ranks of the protesters, but held in check by the saner organisers of the #EndSARS movement, had been rumbling like a volcano. Before dawn on Wednesday, the aggrieved youths erupted in volcanic fury. In wavelike motion, the anger of youths, transported by social media spread across the country, resulting in an orgy of looting, burning of targeted public and private property. Several police stations in some states were burnt just as a number of police officers were killed. On Thursday night, President Muhammadu Buhari addressed the nation, urging the protesting youths to sheathe their swords, saying that their voices have been heard loud and clear.

LAGOS



From Wednesday morning, October 21, Lagos has been the epicenter of violence that ensued after peaceful protesters were attacked by soldiers at the Lekki tollgate. Youths went berserk, burning public and private property, including the family home of Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu, as well as some business concerns they believed belong to Asiwaju Bola Tinubu, former governor of the state and national leader of the ruling All Progressives Congress, APC.

Several buses parked at the BRT terminal in Ebute-Meta area of the metropolis were set ablaze just as part of the building housing the Nigerian Port Authority was also razed. Police stations, a bank building, a local government secretariat, among other public buildings were equally torched by the rampaging irate youths.

In the view of the protesters, the violence is only a temporary setback as they have vowed to continue the fight until their demands are fully met. One of the protesters, Wilson Edafe, condemned the Lagos State government, saying: "It is unfortunate that the Lagos State government accepted wrong counsel, and in doing so inadvertently personalised what was originally a national burden. Edo State was the first state to declare curfew, but in spite of the violence that preceded the declaration of curfew in the state, the government (Edo State government) was very shrewd and calculative in managing the crisis, but that was not seen in the case of Lagos. Rather, the government naively conceded to the military option and has now found itself at the wrong end. As it stands now, our campaign has been temporarily suspended by the turn of events. I used the word 'temporarily' because we are not going to back down until we achieve our primary aim, which is, of course, the birth of a new Nigeria where the future of our youths and children as well as that of generation yet unborn is secured."

PLATEAU



In Jos, the Plateau State capital, hoodlums spread sorrow, pain and agony on innocent citizens. They smashed the windscreens of vehicles, attacked people and looted shops. At the Ahmadu Bello Way Jos, the hoodlums chased the protesters away with dangerous weapons and set vehicles of innocent persons on fire. They invaded the Terminus market, chased the traders away and looted their goods and food stuffs. The story was not different at Gyero Junction, Bukuru expressway where two persons were allegedly shot dead while a church was set ablaze.

In response, Plateau State governor, Simon Lalong, declared a 24-hour curfew to avert further breakdown of law and order. The curfew was very effective as the protesters heeded it and vacated from the streets while the hoodlums went into hiding. One of the protesters, Joshua David, said the curfew was a welcome development to end the violence, but assured that the peaceful protest would resume when the curfew is lifted.

KEBBI

Youths in Kebbi protested for only one day, with no tension and the government did not declare curfew. The next day, the residents resumed their normal activities.

Leader of the Northern Groups Coalition in the state and convener of the protest, Comrade Muhammed Ibrahim, told Sunday Sun: “Our protest is not in support of SARS or is it against SARS. Our protest is largely to send a message on insecurity in Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country, right from Boko Haram to banditry, kidnapping and all sorts of crimes. We want the government to end insecurity in the country, particularly in the northern states like Yobe, Borno and Adamawa, which have suffered from insurgency while Kaduna, Zamfara and Kastina have been in the grip of banditry and kidnapping. For the past one year and a half, parts of Kebbi State like Zuru, Bena, Dankowasagu have been fiefdom of bandits and kidnappers. That is why we want the government to end insecurity, whether it wants to use SARS or SWAT. Better policing is what Nigerians want.”

IMO



In Imo State, the #EndSARS protest was largely peaceful as it was in Lagos. On the first week, hundreds of youths in Owerri, the state capital, poured into the streets with placards that had inscriptions denouncing police brutality, extortion and extra-judicial killings. They proceeded to barricade the entrance to the Government House Complex off Okigiwe Road roundabout, and sang solidarity songs.

From there they marched to the Freedom Square and also occupied the major junction there for four days. Chairman, Imo State Youth Forum, Comrade Achiever Onyelike, who addressed journalists explained that the protest was a consequence of failed political leadership, decay in governance and unemployment, and clearly beyond the quest for drastic police reforms. But after the Lekki soldiers attack on Tuesday night, hot-head youths in Imo attacked two police stations at Nworie-Ubi in Mbaitoli Local Government Area and Orji, Owerri North LGA. This prompted Governor Hope Uzodimma to impose a 24-hour curfew throughout the state, to forestall escalation of the violence.

RIVERS

As the tidal wave of violence spread to Rivers State, Governor Nyesom Wike promptly imposed a 24-hour curfew in some parts of Port Harcourt city and Obio/Akpor local government areas as well as in all parts of Oyigbo Local Government Area following reported cases of violence and destruction caused by hoodlums, who also unleashed mayhem on the police.

Youths in the state have vowed to sustain the peaceful protests until till justice is given to victims of police brutality. They particularly demanded that justice be done to the late Chima Ikwunado, E. Sleek and others allegedly killed by Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) operatives in the state.

ENUGU

The Coal City state was a big surprise as residents had always shown a studied indifference to group protests and the stay-at-home orders of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the past. But this time around, the #EndSARS protest was successful, partly because youths were deeply upset as some of them had been victims of SARS brutality. Giving insight to what made the difference, one the youths, Uche Oha, said: “This is a national protest and some young people here have fallen victims of the brutality and atrocity of the police. Also, the bad leadership in this country is affecting us the youths the more. Look at the large crowd of youths that trooped out for the protest, I bet you more than 90 per cent of us are jobless, after suffering to acquire education. So, it is an issue that affected every Nigerian no matter where you come from.”

Though the peaceful protest started in the state in a low tune, it gathered momentum after some days with celebrities like Flavour, Phyno, Zoro, Kcee and some Nollywood artists leading. But the mood and tone of the protest changed after the Lekki massacre on Tuesday night. As the viral videos of the soldiers attack on the peaceful protesters at Lekki began to circulate on social media, some youths alleged to be hoodlums took over and stormed the city to terrorize people. The failed attempt of miscreants to burn down Enugu North Local Government headquarters, prompted the governor to declare a 24-hour curfew on Wednesday.

One of the leaders in the state, Dr. Mkginger Ibeneme, who spoke with Sunday Sun, said that the campaign would continue until the demands of the youths are met: “The youths should be able to express themselves, Tech does not mean criminality, that somebody owns an iPhone does not mean he is a thief, that somebody is carrying laptop does not mean he is a Yahoo boy. Dressing cool doesn’t mean you are a crook, looking good or being a student doesn’t mean you are a crook. Nigerian police must act like police all over the world.

“We want governance to improve; we want the life of the common man to improve. We want access to education, healthcare, accountability and transparency in government; that is what the protest is all about. And it will continue until our demands are met.”

KOGI

The #EndSARS protest was minimal in Kogi and did not record any casualty. Although the protest actually took place on October 14, Governor Yahaya Bello used the carrot and stick approach to prevent the situation from degenerating further. It was learnt that the governor gave out some huge amount of money to the protesters who were mainly students of tertiary institutions in the state and at the same time provided some measures to checkmate any further protests. For instance, it was learnt that some fierce-looking masquerades from Ebiraland, the ancestral home of the governor paraded Lokoja, the state capital, immediately after the EndSARS protests, threatening to deal with anyone who dared come out for any other protests. The masquerades accompanied by wild youths allegedly armed with sticks and dangerous weapons sang pro-government songs and intermittently hailed the governor.

ABIA

As in other states, youths in Umuahia, the Abia State capital grounded the city as they joined their counterparts in other parts of the country to peacefully protest against the horrendous brutality of SARS operatives. Just like in other parts of the country, the peaceful protests turned violent in Aba, the commercial nerve centre of the state, on Tuesday. The protesters killed two policemen and burnt down the Zone 6 annex, Ogbor Hill, Aba, which houses the Dragon Squad of the Nigeria police.

While Aba raged, on the same day, the #EndSARS protesters clashed with police along Bende Road, Umuahia. Unofficial report had it that one of the protesters was killed while several others were injured.

In response, Governor Okezie Ikpeazu imposed a 24-hour curfew on Aba and Umuahia from 6:00p.m on Tuesday till further notice. While Umuahia remained relatively calm on Wednesday, Aba boiled as the protesters, defying the curfew, marched through the streets of the city, particularly the City C0centre to wreak havoc.

Youths vandalised the Aba Town hall (built before the country's independence) and later set it on fire.

Thereafter, the protesters moved over to the High Court complex on Pound Road, vandalized some of the buildings before setting them ablaze equally. Two commercial banks and a shopping mall under construction in the city were not spared.

Despite the pleas of the government, leaders of the protests appeared not to be moved by whatever promises made by the state government. One of them, Gideon Offor Dimkpa, told Sunday Sun in Umuahia that they would continue with the agitation until the political leadership does the right thing regarding the police.

EBONYI

In rhythm with what happened in other states after soldiers attacked peaceful protesters at the Lekki #EndSARS protest ground, violence broke out in Abakaliki, the Ebonyi State capital on Wednesday morning.

The protesters, who reportedly came from neighbouring states, attacked and burnt down two police stations and vandalized police vehicles and property. The protesters also attempted to break into the Abakaliki Correctional Centre, to free inmates, but they were resisted by security agents.

Governor David Umahi in a statewide broadcast, declared a 24-hour curfew in the state and directed “security agencies to block all borders of the state and to protect all lives and property.”

EDO

Organizers of the #EndSARS protest in Edo State have called off the protest, following large scale violence, killings and destruction that trailed the protest, and which led to two jailbreaks and freeing of 1,993 inmates from the two correctional centres in Benin and Oko.

Consequently, the state government imposed a curfew in the state as security operatives intensified efforts to re-arrest the prisoners and inmates that fled.

Violence broke out after hoodlums hijacked the protest and unleashed mayhem in the state. Commenting on the protest and the turn of events, a rights activist, Osazee Edigin, said: “Ab initio, we had a different view about the protest. We wanted a holistic approach, not just SARS.”

Edigin, who lamented over the hijack of the protest by hoodlums, the ensuing deaths and large scale of destruction in the state, said: “A protest ought not to lead to economic crisis. It is the positive aftermath that we should look at. We are appealing for every protest to be suspended for now.”

KWARA

The peaceful #EndSARS protest embarked upon by youths of the country started in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, on October 8, but on Sunday, October 18, it took a new dimension as the venue of the protest – Post Office roundabout – was turned to a battle ground by suspected cult groups who hijacked the protest. This led to the death of one person and the severing of the head of another was dropped on the overhead bridge close to the post office.

Kwara State governor, AbdulRahman AbdulRazaq last Sunday condemned the attacks on the peaceful #ENDSARS protesters, describing the violent attacks as despicable and intolerable.

He said: “I vehemently denounce the violent attacks on the protesters and I call on the security agencies to ensure that the dastardly act is addressed immediately. The daredevil attackers must be identified, arrested, and prosecuted immediately. The attack must not go unchallenged.”

AbdulRazaq visited the victim alongside ace musician, Yusuf Olusola, known as CDQ, and a few other protesters. The governor undertook to foot the bills of the injured.

ZAMFARA

To people in Zamfara State, the call for the scrapping of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) washed over like water poured on the back of a duck and the simple reason was that the police unit has been helpful in controlling crime in the state.

The Special Adviser, Public Enlightenment, Media and Communication to the Governor, Alhaji Zailani Bappa, said the stand of the Zamfara State government was premised on facts and figures rather than on sentiments being exhibited by those pushing for the end of SARS.

He said: “Governor Bello Mohammed had made it clear that Zamfara State was against the scrapping of FSARS before it was scrapped. This is because the squad in Zamfara State was vital to the fight against banditry in the state. It has been doing tremendously well in the fight against banditry, armed robbery and other crimes. FSARS was helping tremendously in apprehending, not only the bandits themselves, but their informants. It has also helped in sanitising our towns and villages from hooligans who made lives unbearable to the citizens in the past.”

AKWA IBOM

In Akwa Ibom, the EndSARS protest was quite peaceful. The popular Ibom Plaza was like the nerve centre and primary location where the essence of the protest was communicated through songs and speeches, after the protesters would have marched through some major streets. The protesters only occupied the plaza during the day, during which they blocked the surrounding roads but re-opened them in the evening and then dispersed. However, on Thursday, they moved to the Idongesit Nkanga Secretariat, where the frightened civil servants readily shut their offices and scampered for safety.

One of the organisers, Patrick Aniedi, told our correspondent on Thursday that they were not sponsored by anybody to be on the streets.

“In some other states, we were told that politicians, Nollywood and music stars bankrolled the protest. But we don’t want that here. We will continue to be in the streets till all our demands are met. That is why we don’t want hoodlums to hijack this protest.

Like what was seen in several northern states where pro-government and pro-SARS protests were held to counter the #EndSARS campaign, a group emerged in the state, in support of the Federal Government.

The counter-protest was organised under the aegis of South South Legacy Group, and led by the Akwa Ibom State Coordinator, Mr. Bassey Awa, who addressed members and supporters of the group at the Millennium Park, Uyo. Awa called on the youths to give President Muhammadu Buhari enough time to implement the police reforms, which started with the disbandment of the dreaded SARS Unit of the police.

ANAMBRA

The grouse of youths against SARS bore a major fruit in Anambra State with the instant sack of Mr James Nwafor, who had served as Senior Special Assistant on Security to Governor Willie Obiano. Until his appointment by the governor, Nwafor was in-charge of the defunct Special Anti-Robbery Squad based in Awkuzu, Oyi Local Government Area of the state. He had been accused of many wrong doings while he headed the police unit.

Generally, the protests in Onitsha, Nnewi and other parts of the state were peaceful until hoodlums infiltrated the protest, hijacked and turned it violent in Nnewi and began destroying public property. A police station in the area was reportedly set ablaze. By Thursday, violence had spread to other areas. The deteriorating situation compelled the

governor to impose a 24-hour curfew in the state. In his speech, he assured youths of the state of the determination and commitment of his administration to improve their lot.

DELTA

The inauguration of an eight-member Judicial Panel of inquiry into police brutality and other human rights abuses by Governor Ifeanyi Okowa of Delta State has clearly not assuaged the feelings of #EndSARS protesters across the state.

Even his promise to establish a special victims' support fund for the payment of monetary compensation to deserving victims has not also yielded the desired results as the youths remained resolute to continue the protest, which has been generally peaceful.

Perhaps, the shooting of protesters at Lekki in Lagos on Tuesday has renewed strength of the youths and their resolve to sustain the protests, which have had a major toll on socio-economic activities.



Rapheal

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