

War in Igboland

.... Tension in Imo, Ebonyi, Enugu, Abia ... Over 70 killed in a week, 350 houses, cars destroyed Nobody can stop us –IPOB

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From Magnus Eze, Jude Chinedu, Enugu, Stanley Uzoaru, Owerri, Chijioke Agwu, Abakaliki and Okey Sampson, Umuahia

The South East region is arguably the most peaceful in the country. However, events of late, especially in the past week, have threatened the security of the region.

From Aguleri/Umueri in Anambra to Effium in Ebonyi; Oruku in Enugu to Abia's Ikwuano boundary axis with Akwa Ibom and the Orlu zone of Imo State, there has been total war in the region. Many lives have been lost in the conflicts while buildings and other properties were also destroyed.

No fewer than 50 persons were reportedly killed in the Effium crisis of Ohaukwu local government area of Ebonyi State, and several buildings razed. In the Oruku communal clash in Nkanu East LGA of Enugu State, at least 35 buildings were burnt down.

The Orlu mayhem

The most pronounced of the crisis is that of Orlu in Imo State, which has practically been turned to a war zone. The Orlu unrest allegedly emanated from skirmishes between the Nigerian Army and the Eastern Security Network (ESN), an outfit floated by the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) in parts of the South East and South South regions.

For more than a week, life was hell in the place with economic activities totally paralysed, leading to the imposition of curfew in about 10 local government areas by Imo Governor, Hope Uzodimma.

Sources claimed that the crisis started when soldiers took the fight to the IPOB vigilante in Okporo, Orlu while searching for the camp of the ESN. The bloody clash that ensued allegedly claimed the lives of two soldiers on that mission, while the vigilantes reclined into their shells in the forest. However, a reprisal the next day sparked off serious crisis in the town as the angry soldiers were said to have killed innocent civilians in the process. Also, houses and shops were said to have been razed by the soldiers.

IPOB has however not owned responsibility for the attack but a group that called itself "Volunteers" had taken to the social media claiming responsibility.

But whether it was the ESN or Volunteers that allegedly attacked the soldiers, the fact is that innocent residents of Orlu and its environs have been made the scapegoat.

"They were just chasing people about, they were asking if we have seen the IPOB people, they will flog you and give you all sorts of punishment," an Orlu resident said. Media and Publicity Secretary of IPOB, Emma Powerful in a statement had earlier warned that any attempt by the soldiers would be matched with resistance; this perhaps might have given credence to the claim that the group had a hand in the attack.

"I have said it time without number, did we go to their barracks to look for their trouble or they came into our forest to attack us. We shall not condone this any longer, we would not allow them to kill us again; we wouldn't allow what happened in Obigbo to happen again in Biafra land. They can't kill us because we have not done anything to them other than to protect our land and forest. They are just killing innocent civilians", Powerful alleged while responding to the Orlu incident.

Various verified and unverified videos depicting human rights abuses by security forces had continued to emerge from the town even as Governor Uzodimma had declared curfew in the area. Security forces were alleged to be visiting people's homes, fishing out innocent males for maltreatment.

A socio-cultural group, Orlu Political Action Committee (OPAC) and several other groups had condemned the human rights violations and the

emergent humanitarian crisis there. A statement by National President of OPAC, Collins Opuozor called on the Federal Government to immediately withdraw the security forces to deescalate tension there.

OPAC lamented that the people of Orlu had not slept in their homes as a conflict that allegedly occurred in the forests between IPOB and Nigerian forces was unjustifiably being punished on the innocent residents of an otherwise peaceful town.

The government had responded accordingly as the soldiers were reportedly withdrawn while leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu in reciprocation, on Wednesday, ordered his men to “stand down.”

Meanwhile, elder statesman and Senior Advocate of Nigeria, Mike Ahamba, who condemned the Orlu mayhem, however, called on Igbo leaders to call IPOB to order to avoid degeneration to the Obigbo incident in Rivers State.

“This is the time for Igbo leaders to call Kanu and IPOB to order, this was exactly how it started in Obigbo, now they are bringing the same thing to Imo. They should not allow this to happen again, our youths should be properly trained not to indulge in this kind of act, I want to commend the governor for his prompt action in imposing the curfew in Orlu”, Ahamba said.

Traditional ruler of Umudioka ancient Kingdom in Orlu, Eze Thomas Obiefule also commended the governor for the instant process of returning peace to the place. He noted that the situation would have gone out of hand if Uzodimma had not employed wisdom in dealing with the unrest. Saturday Sun gathered fear and uncertainty still pervade the area with residents saying that they would not want to be victims of accidental discharge. “The police people as early as 5am have started shooting, may be to scare us, we don’t know, that is why all of us have remained indoors”, one of them told our reporter.

Another resident lamented the total grounding of economic activities in the area. “Nobody sells anything again, even at the hour we were expected to be out, so many of the people who died were those in their shops. We don’t even have anything to eat, where do we go and buy them? The government should please help us before all of us die of hunger”, he bemoaned.

Regardless, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign States of Biafra (MASSOB) has said that the Orlu crisis was part of the revolutionary struggle for Biafra actualization and restoration.

MASSOB leader, Uchenna Madu said the incident was not different from the Okigwe massacre of 2003 or Onitsha crisis of 2004, 2006 and Nkpor killings, as well as Asaba, Obigbo, Aba, Umuahia, Okigwe, Owerri, Enugu, Abakiliki, Nsukka and Oji River which he added had all witnessed different dimensions of the revolutionary heat.

“The Nigerian soldiers are always eager and ever ready to clampdown on pro-Biafra agitators but always keep mum and inactive on the criminal and terrorist activities of Fulani herdsmen in Western, Eastern and Middle Belt regions,” Madu said.

MASSOB therefore advised Southeast governors to quickly engage all the pressure and youth groups in Igbo land to build a synergy between the leaders and the people. “Security situation in Igbo land has already escalated. What is happening in Orlu can be described as a child’s play because Aba, Onitsha, Nsukka and Okigwe may soon catch fire,” Madu predicted.

While residents count their losses, they said that over 13 buildings, including shops and a church, were razed while at least 10 people were feared dead.

Ebonyi’s killing field

In Ebonyi, the crisis, which resulted from an obviously mismanaged National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) leadership tussle at the Effium motor park has caused unimaginable havoc in the community.

At the last count, no fewer than 50 persons had been killed while 100 persons were injured. Also over 300 houses, shops, filling stations, cars and other valuables worth hundreds of millions were destroyed with more than 3000 persons displaced.

Genesis of crisis

Though different in many ways, Effium people and their Ezza-Effium brothers had co-existed peacefully for ages till late ‘70s when politics entered the community and introduced division in their midst. However, the two clans continued to manage and live with the division without fighting each other until 2002 when the tussle for the five councillorship positions in the community widened the division and pitched the once peace people against one another.

Saturday Sun gathered that the crisis and violence that resulted from the tussle between them over which clan should take over the five councillorship positions in the community led to violent killings and destruction of property on the both sides. It was gathered that no fewer than 10 persons were killed while homes and property were razed.

Though the matter was later resolved by the then Governor of the state, Dr. Sam Egwu, that election marked the beginning of the bitter supremacy battle that has continued to rock the community. Since that 2002 incident, the two clans have been in a sort of competition to outwit each other.

The struggle for domination and supremacy between the two clans assumed a crazy dimension from 2015 when for the first time, an Effium man became the Chairman of Ohaukwu local government area in the person of Clement Odah. Odah was first appointed as a caretaker chairman by Governor David Umahi, and later elected as executive chairman. He was just re-elected in 2020 for the second term. By the virtue of the fact that Effium produced the Chairman of Ohaukwu, the only House of Assembly seat- Ohaukwu North Constituency- usually rotated among the Effium people and the Ezza Effium was zoned to the Ezza-Effium people in 2019, and Chinedu Awo took the position. This scenario resulted in some kind of balance of power between the two clans; while the Effium people control the council power, the Ezza-Effium wield the legislative power. This heightened the supremacy battle.

Remote cause of crisis

While many, especially those not privy to the goings-on in the community, accused the NURTW leaders of instigating crisis in the community,

investigation has shown that serious crisis of supremacy had already permeated the fabric of the community and destroyed whatever mutual love and trust that ever existed between the two clans. The issue was the ongoing Enumeration Area Demarcation exercise of the National Population Commission (NPC) in the community. The Ezza-Effium people in the community had accused the Council Chairman of using his position to manipulate the demarcation and enumeration exercise in favour of his people.

In a petition to Governor Umahi, dated 8th January, 2021 and signed by Forum of Stakeholders of Effium Indigenes of Ezza-Ezekunna extraction, Ezza-Effium people alleged that Odah was illegally annexing some parts of their Wards to favour Effium Wards.

The petitioned which was titled "Complaint of arbitrary annexation of parts of Effium Ward 2 and Wigbeke Ward 2 which are Wards of Effium indigenes of Ezza-Ezekunna extraction to Effium Ward 1, Wigbeke Ward 1 and Wigbeke Ward 3 which are Wards of Effium indigenes of Korri extraction in the ongoing enumeration area demarcation exercise of the National Population Commission," and signed by the House of Assembly member, Chinedu Awo; Special Assistant to Governor Umahi on Vegetable Market, Emmanuel Uzor; a former Permanent Secretary, Ignatius Una; councillor of Wigbeke Ward 2, Felicia Eze; Benard Nwankwo and the Coordinator of Effium South Development Centre, Mrs. Ogwale Eucharua, among other stakeholders appealed to the governor to call Odah to order. They also urged Umahi to direct "prompt and proper reversal of all parts of the wards of Effium indigenes of Ezza-Ezekunna extraction or Ezza-Effium people unlawfully and mischievously annexed to Effium indigenous people's ward in the ongoing EAD exercise."

Part of the petition reads: "That Clement Odah, Chairman of Ohaukwu LGA should be called to order. A council Chairman who should be interested in the peace of his community and other parts of his council area, who unfortunately is trying to cause crises by masterminding these unlawful and provocative annexations is not being fair to his people and the state government.

"A proper Enumeration Area Demarcation exercise in all the wards in Effium community especially the now threatened Effium Ward 2 and Wigbeke Ward 2 all of which are wards of Effium indigenes of Ezza-Ezekunna extraction."

"It is pertinent to recall that the peculiarities of Effium community where Effium people of Ezza Ezekunna extraction or Ezza-Effium people constituted about 80% of the entire population of the community warranted the demarcation of the five electoral wards of the community with family/kindred labels or names instead of the normal physical or geographical boundaries by the Government of old Anambra State through Edit No.4 of 1990. The essence of this unconstitutional arrangement was to circumvent and diminish the impact of the population of Effium indigenes of Ezza-Ezekunna extraction.

"The implication of that arrangement which still subsists is that compounds, homes or settlements of Effium indigenes of Ezza-Ezekunna extraction or Ezza-Effium people and those of Effium indigenes of Kori extraction exist side by side but do not belong to same wards; hence people are distinguished and distinguishable by respective family/kindred names as well as their respective languages. This peculiar situation has regrettably been gazetted in 2004 by Ebonyi State Government."

Last straw that broke the camel's back

Saturday Sun gathered that while the governor was yet to address the concerns raised in the petition as the NPC's EAD exercise continued, the LGA Chairman reportedly sacked the caretaker leadership of NURTW at the Effium park and imposed another leadership loyal to him. It was when the new leadership attempted to take over the park on January 23 that crisis erupted and spread to the community.

The state government in a swift reaction had banned the activities of NURTW at the park and summoned stakeholders of the community to an emergency security meeting at the Old Government House in Abakaliki on Sunday morning.

At the meeting presided over by Deputy Governor Kelchi Igwe, over 30 stakeholders of the community were arrested and taken to state police command for interrogation over their alleged roles in the crisis.

The stakeholders were arrested on the orders of the Deputy Governor. Some of those arrested were Chairman of the LGA, Clement Odah; House of Assembly member, Chinedu Awo; Coordinator of Effium Development Centre, Sunday Agbo and his Effium South counterpart, Eucharua Ogwale.

Others are Special Assistant to the governor on Vegetable Market, Emmanuel Uzor and his Parks Development counterpart, Emmanuel Igwe. Government also imposed curfew on the community as part of measures to restore calm and peace there.

Umahi's visit to war zone

The governor visited the warring community last Monday in company of the Commissioner of Police, Aliyu Garba, other security chiefs as well as some top members of his government.

He was received at Effium Central School by a motley crowd of grief-stricken stakeholders, youths, women and children.

A member of Eze's cabinet from Effium indigenes of Kori, Chief Vincent Egbe, told the governor that Ezza-Effium people had always intimidated them in the community because of their number.

Egbe further alleged that the Ezza-Effium people were always looking for any opportunity to attack them with or without provocation, saying the latest attack was unwarranted.

"Your Excellency, even the civil war was not as bad as what we have witnessed in this community since Saturday. Even as I am talking to you now, they are burning people's houses in the villages. A lot of people have died. If we should keep the figure together; we are arriving at over 100 persons," he said.

He appealed to the governor to do everything within the law and his power to restore peace in the community.

On the other hand, Rev Ogwale Ogwale, who spoke on behalf of Ezza-Effium people, accused their Effium counterparts of breaching the age-long agreement between their forefathers.

In an emotion-laden voice, Ogwale alleged that the Effium indigenes had always referred to them as 'strangers' in the community in contravention of the 'covenant' of joint ownership which their forefathers entered into at the formation of Effium community after the Ezza forefathers helped

them to ward off their warring neighbours.

Ogwale said: "Your Excellency, the truth is that we don't have the love and peace we used to have before. Some Effium people always refer to us as strangers in this community and that we should go back to Onueke where our forefathers came from. As a result, Ezza people started telling them too that they are not even Igbo people. But if I tell you how the story of this place started, you will know that all of us are just being foolish. But I am sure that there was a covenant made by Ezza and the Effium before all of them decided to coexist as one here. If you go around the community today you will still see some of the covenant trees made by our forefathers."

He too appealed to the governor to help them restore peace in the community, saying they had no other place to go. Others speakers blamed political leaders from the community for the crisis and appealed to the governor to take decisive action against them.

Responding, Umahi condemned the killings and violence that took place in the community, stressing that they were unjustifiable no matter the provocations.

He stated that he was committed to restoring peace in the community. He said he would have divided them into two autonomous communities but regretted that there is no physical boundary between them.

He, however, suspended all the political appointees in his government from the two sides and also dissolved all NURTW structures at the park as well as all youth leaderships in the community.

The governor also directed that all the stakeholders arrested in connection with the crisis remained in police custody until peace returned in the community.

He directed his deputy to liaise with the State Attorney General, the Chief of Staff, Queen Agwu and the Principal Secretary, Clement Nweke, to set up judicial panel of inquiry to look into the remote and immediate causes of the crisis and make recommendations for return of peace in the community.

He further vowed to prosecute anyone found to have participated in causing the crisis no matter his position in the government or the society.

Symphony of destruction in Enugu

Last Saturday, over 35 houses and 20 shops were burnt down by indigenes of Oruku community in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State.

Saturday Sun gathered that more than 100 houses had been burnt down with some members of the community escaping death by the skin of their teeth since the murder of their traditional ruler, Chief Emmanuel Mba on December 26, last year.

For over 30 years, Oruku and their Umuode neighbours were at war over issues ranging from community leadership and land. The crisis was eventually brought to an end in 2019 by the Enugu State Government in a peace deal celebrated as one of the greatest achievements of the Governor Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi-led administration.

Behind the euphoria that greeted the peace deal, some members of Oruku community were allegedly embittered and vowed not to respect the pact on the grounds that the community was short-changed by some of their representatives.

This allegation sharply divided the community as those still interested in the crisis formed a group within the community and gradually, bad blood and tension began to rise leading to the killing of the traditional ruler allegedly by policemen brought in from the Force headquarters Abuja to arrest him.

The death of the traditional ruler sparked off serious violence which led to the burning of over 40 houses and shops on both sides. The deployment of soldiers and policemen calmed the situation and life gradually returned to the community.

Just when it seemed as though peace had finally returned to the community, thugs armed with AK47 rifles and machine guns invaded the community, chased everyone into the bush; burnt stalls at the community market and houses belonging to some persons in the community.

Eyewitnesses and victims who identified some of the hoodlums as members of the community said that most of the persons whose houses were attacked were those who canvassed for peace between Oruku and Umuode.

Addressing the Commissioner of Police when he visited the area, one of the community leaders and former Chairman of the Council, Chief Ejike Ani, said: "They have 18 AK47 rifles and two General Purpose Machine Guns (GPMG); they are people from this village. They have relocated to Aguikepa community. Actually, the guns were what we used in fighting with Umuode community. That was the major reason why our Igwe was killed and they said that I must equally go down but it is only God that decides who will die.

"We've written several petitions, the former Commissioner of Police has done his bit but somehow something keeps going wrong. If we go down you will see a lot of empty shells. The whole market has been razed down. This same people were arrested but were granted bail by the Special Tactical Squad. They are the ones causing all these problems in this community.

"The same Tactical Squad also disarmed our neighbourhood watch so there is no resistance at all. You can see the place is still burning. They don't want peace to reign. They want Umuode and Oruku to continue fighting. That is also why the Igwe was killed."

Asked how the community was able to acquire such number of arms, he explained: "You know Umuode and Oruku had a battle that lasted for about 35 years. So, over time, the Oruku community led by the late Igwe even wrote petitions to both the state government, the Commissioner of Police, the Inspector General of Police.

"They are using those guns to hunt those people who went for the peace process with Umuode and those who signed the agreement and those who told government that we have arms and are ready to hand them over."

Narrating how her home was invaded and burnt down, Mrs Anthonia Nnamani (not real name) said she was almost burnt alive by the hoodlums. "I was in the house with my husband's sister when some boys came in from nowhere and grabbed us. They dragged us outside the house and threatened to burn us if we went back inside.

"I told them I was still mourning my husband who died three days ago. They said they were not interested. They went ahead to fill the house with

dry leaves and set it on fire. All my clothes were burnt together with all my properties.”

An indigene, Oluchi Nwatu, claimed that all the perpetrators of the violence were known faces in the community who divided themselves and decided to attack other members of the community.

Also narrating his ordeal, John Omaba, explained: “I don’t know the cause of the problem. The only thing I think could be the cause is that the chairman of the community’s neighbourhood watch group lives in my brother’s house close to mine.

“They told me before now that they will come and burn this place. I explained to them that the chairman was not the owner of the house. He is just a tenant here. But they came, burnt my house and my brother’s house and everything inside.”

Bloody Abia/Akwa Ibom boundary

At least, three persons from Abia State were reportedly killed and four others abducted on Friday, January 22, 2021, in the renewed clash between the people of Obugwu, Ekpiri, Usaka Ukwu and Obono Upa; all in Ariam Usaka clan in Ikwuano Local Government of Abia State and their Nkari neighbours in Ini Local Government of Akwa Ibom State, following boundary dispute.

With the recent clash, there have been claims and counter claims as both sides asserted they were the ones to be first attacked by their neighbours.

Sometime in June last year, the Abia people woke up to observe that four persons from their communities were murdered in cold blood by their neighbours. Traditional ruler of Ugwuegbu community in Ariam Usaka clan, Eze Ambrose Nwagwu, had disclosed that the four persons were allegedly killed in their farmlands.

He claimed that their Akwa Ibom neighbours did not stop at killing his subjects; they also carried away their corpses and made an appeal for the corpses to be released as to accord them befitting burial.

Eze Nwagwu, who noted his people had been living peacefully with Nkari people for a very long time, said he did not know what overcame their neighbours that they suddenly started disputing farmlands that have belonged to Usaka people of Abia state over the ages.

Also, in August, 2020, when it appeared that peace had returned in the disputed area, a sudden violence erupted in which about 11 persons were allegedly killed while scores were injured on both sides of the divide.


Worried by the incessant boundary dispute between the warring communities; Abia deputy governor, Oko Chukwu who is also Chairman, Abia State Boundary Committee, has visited the Usuka Ukwu and Azunchia Ariam communities following the recent attacks from their neighbours. He gave the assurance that Abia Government would not allow an inch of its territory to be ceded to other States under whatever guise. “As a responsive Government, we will not allow lands belonging to Abia to be taken over by people that want to expand their territories at all costs”, he stated.

He said they will continue to mount pressure on the National Boundary Commission (NBC) to carry out the final delineation and demarcation of their boundary lines. The NBC, investigations revealed, delineated the boundaries of the disputed area about 11 years ago, but was yet to make physical demarcation of the boundary.

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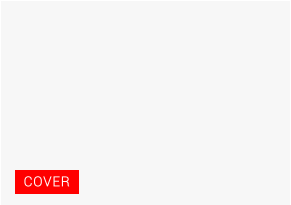
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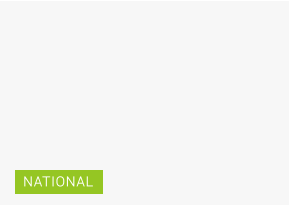
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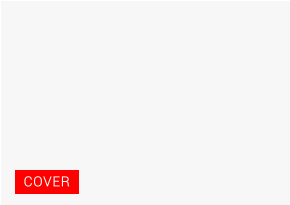
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