



Ughelli Market of crisis

• Delta communities at war over control of marketplace

From Paul Osuyi, Asaba

TRADERS at the Ughelli Main Market, Ughelli North Local Government, Delta State, are threatening with caution, obviously for the uneasy calm that currently pervades the trading area. Security patrol vans with fierce looking and gun wielding operatives are in strategic locations to forestall further uprising.

This followed recently killings at the market by two warring communities of Ekiugbo and Otor-Iwhreko. Crisis broke out as both communities lay claim to the control of the market.

Investigation revealed that traders cough out between N5,000 and N10,000 as annual levy, besides the daily collection of N300. As a result of this, Ekiugbo and Otor-Iwhreko have been at war over the years, both laying claims to be the real landlord of the market.

In the latest uprising, five persons were killed with the fifth victim being gruesomely beheaded. President of Ekiugbo Community, Baker Ejiefe Bernard, attributed the crisis to boundary dispute.

He told: "It has been a long dispute between the two communities just because of boundary. Over 15 years ago, crisis erupted and the kingdom called a meeting and they set up a committee to look into the problem. The committee actually worked and submitted its report but it was swept under the carpet.

"About eight years ago, the same crisis started, the same leaders, the same government came and set up another committee. They went, they did their work and but the report goes the same way as in the past.

Then after about five years, the problem came up again. The kingdom called again and set up another committee. The committee worked, submitted its white paper but nothing happened.

"Two years ago, under the leadership of my predecessor, the same crisis erupted and they went to the Ovie Palace that they should find a lasting solution to it. They

asked, 'where are the (previous) white papers? Nobody could answer because there are some eminent chiefs that are conniving to sustain the crisis.

"Wisely enough, they tried to look for a balancing situation, a temporary solution. They agreed that none of the boys from either Ekiugbo or Otor-Iwhreko should go to the areas in dispute to demand for any revenue from the traders.

"Even the traders were very happy. We concurred, waiting for the kingdom to call us for a final solution. I am talking about two years ago. But there was nothing of such.

"Meanwhile, the Otor-Iwhreko boys were sneaking in to collect revenues and our women are there. They cried out to us and we followed up by reporting to the appropriate quarters but nothing was done.

"Let me go to what brought about the recent uprising. Our vigilance chairman, who happens to be my predecessor, was driving from Otovwodo, and his car broke down within the main market. He was trying to observe the problem when he saw some boys collecting money from the traders. They were collecting N100 each from them.

"He challenged them but he was told that he has no right to stop them. And that he was going to be molested if he failed to stay out of their business.

"At this point, others had already gathered and before you know it, they molested him. He was able to escape, but had to get a mechanic and three of our boys to go and help him rescue the vehicle.

"While they were there trying to fix the vehicle, those boys came again with guns, right there inside the market, they didn't go home and started shooting. They had to escape.

"The boys started looking for anyone from Ekiugbo. Once they caught them, they killed them. Even up till the second day. One of them was caught, beheaded and burnt. And they even carried the dead body to Ogheneweta junction.

"All this while, I was always calling the Area Commander and the DPO. I told them what was happening, but they did not re-

spond. We know after the #EndSARS protest it has become difficult for police to release their personnel.

"That was how it was for almost three days. Otor-Iwhreko youth locked everywhere from Otor-Iwhreko down to Egor Junction. Until recently when soldiers and police came and dismantled their barricades. But later the soldiers left and they came out and started shooting again."

Bernard fingered some stakeholders in Ughelli as allegedly fuelling the crisis, noting that as Ekiugbo president-general, he was committed to peace: "I have been calling meetings right from the very first day that nobody should move out of Ekiugbo to go and fight or do anything harmful, and they listened to me.

"The leadership of Ughelli has failed Ekiugbo people. I thank God government is coming in, and I know there is going to be a special delegation of people that will stand for justice and fairness."

Leaders and residents of Otor-Iwhreko put up hostile attitude when contacted. "We don't want you journalists here. This is not press issue so you better leave and don't speak to anyone in this community. If you don't start going now we will set you ablaze," was the reply from a group of boys who accosted newsmen.

However, a community source said Otor-Iwhreko was the bonafide landlord of the dispute market land, insisting that the community has been around for ages: "A community is a group of people who hold the same beliefs and culture. Even the Nigeria law recognises that once even a stranger resides in a place for 10 years he can be recognised as an indigene.

"If you go to Otor-Iwhreko, you will see a lot of graves of fathers of the land, because you don't bury a man outside his ancestral home. If you say the place was not a community, those graves have been there for years before the thought of creation of wards.

"People of Otor-Iwhreko are the true landlords of the market and there is no disputing that fact. The king and the chiefs know the

truth but are not bold enough to say it."

But tracing the origin of the crisis, a native of Ekiugbo who pleaded not to be named said Otor-Iwhreko was never a community in Ughelli: "It was just a hub because of the river bank that is there.

"People brought in their goods through the river that is at the market. With time they started building huts where they rested and preserved their goods before taking them out for sale.

"And gradually it began to expand. This was even before the market was built there. Ask all those claiming to be from Otor-Iwhreko to show you their ancestral home in Otor-Iwhreko, they will not because it is not there.

"Otor-Iwhreko was created and accepted for political reason, to increase more political wards and that was it."

State Commissioner of Police, Ari Muhammed Ali, vowed to bring the perpetrators of the killings to book, lamenting that lives lost could not be replaced. He told Daily Sun: "Sanity has been restored, the market is quite operational and functional because the command rose up to its responsibility of ensuring that sanity is restored anywhere we have such communal crisis.

"Our men, in collaboration with the Army, are still there. Through this collaborative effort, we have been able to bring the warring factions together. And the perpetrators of that heinous crime, we are on their trail and definitely, we are going to fish them out, and they will have their date in court upon arrest."

He stated that crisis was as a result of control over who took what from the market: "The communities were struggling to collect revenue from the market because they share common boundary.

"Government is aware of it because I personally briefed the governor on the development. And he has already contacted the authority responsible for demarcation of boundary to go into action and ensure that that boundary is clearly demarcated."