

UNKNOWN GUNMEN BLOOD FLOWS IN SOUTHEAST

...Imo, Abia, Anambra worse hit

■ Many security operatives killed, govt facilities razed

■ Residents groan over indiscriminate arrests, killing of innocent persons

From George Onyejiuwa, Stanley Uzoaru (Owerri), Okey Sampson (Umuahia), Obinna Odogwu (Awka) and Magnus Eze (Enugu)

THE whole of Southeast and parts of South-south geo-political zones have come under severe attacks since early this year by some faceless people popularly referred to as "unknown gunmen". Public infrastructure, especially facilities of the police, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and others have become the prime target of this group just as several security personnel had lost their lives.

The situation has continued to generate palpable tension and fear in the two regions of the country particularly as the Federal Government commenced deployment of more military assets, including troops, intelligence personnel and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) to the disturbed areas.

While the government blamed the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and its security arm, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), for the atrocities, the group has continued to distance itself from any complicity.

Innocent people have fallen victims in the hands of the so-called unknown gunmen, but the more worrisome issue is the military occupation of many towns and roads in the Southeast, including inter-state roads.

The current clampdown on pro-Biafra groups and suspected 'unknown gunmen' has practically crippled economic activities and movements in these areas.

In fact, the matter seemingly got to a head recently as President Muhammadu Buhari took to his Twitter handle to send a stern warning to those, he said, were bent on dismembering Nigeria, threatening to deal ruthlessly with the people of Southeast in the his widely criticized tweet.



•Iwollo Police Division after the gunmen attack.

His threat has, however, not restrained the armed groups, who killed policemen as well as burnt police stations and correctional facilities in Imo, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Akwa Ibom and Rivers states.

As the security forces combed Imo communities in search of members of the IPOB and its vigilante outfit, ESN, Kanayo Nwokie (Ikono), said to be commander of the vigilante, was recently 'neutralized' by security forces in his community, Awomamma in Oru East council of Imo State. Joint-security operations have also continued in the Orlu axis of the state.

Harvest of deaths in Imo

These operations have raised issue of extra-judicial killings as was alleged in the case of Awurum Eze, who troops allegedly burnt down his home in Mbano, after tagging him the second-in-command to the slain Ikono. Eze was eventually arrested in Abia State.

Sunday Sun gathered that the security situation in Imo State recently took a more frightening dimension with the killing of Ahmed Gulak, a former political adviser to President Goodluck Jonathan, in Owerri.

Unconfirmed reports put the number of innocent victims in the state, so far, at over 100, as the special forces of the Military/Police

deployed to the state have continued in their battle against ESN/IPOB agitators and the "unknown gunmen" in Imo.

The deteriorating security situation has also forced prominent citizens in the state to go underground, even as top state government functionaries no longer use their official vehicles after official hours for fear of being attacked by gunmen after an attack on the Commissioner for Entrepreneurship and Skills Acquisition, Ike Umeh, at Orji on April 12, 2021.

While many innocent people especially the youths had fallen victims either to stray bullet or teargas shots fired at them by the security agents, hundreds of Imo

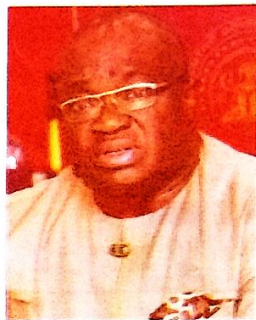
youths are also being arrested and detained by the police for allegedly being members of IPOB/ ESN.

One of such heart-rending cases was on Friday May 28, at the Nekede/Naze Junction along the Owerri - Aba road where Nigeria Air Force personnel allegedly opened fire on motorists and passers-by over the death of one of their colleagues in the hands of gunmen. Five innocent persons were in the process allegedly shot dead, while several others got varying degrees of injuries as they scampered for safety.

On the Monday May 31, Gerany-based Oguchi Unachukwu, 42, from Umuomumu Umuze Mbieri in Mbaitoli council was



•Hope Uzodinma



•Okezie Ikpeazu



•Willie Obiano



•David Umahi



•Ugwuanyi Ifeanyi



✱ **The late Justice Nnaji**

shot dead by personnel of the Air Force 211 Regiment Group at the tollgate of the Sam Mbakwe Cargo Airport.

The deceased was on his way to catch his flight to Lagos en route to his base in Germany.

He was shot dead in the presence of his wife and two little children who were seeing him off to the airport at about 8:30a.m.

The deceased's wife, Ijeoma Unachukwu, in a petition by her lawyer to both the Imo State Commissioner of Police and the Chief of Air Staff, demanded justice over the gruesome and unprovoked murder of her husband.

Her counsel, Ihediohama Akponye, who addressed journalists in Owerri, said that it was the screaming of the wife that had spurred further shootings by the Air Force personnel after the bullet hit him on the forehead.

The trigger-happy airman then ferried him first to the Naval hospital along Aba road before he was taken to the Federal Medical Centre Owerri where they abandoned him.

✱ Similarly, soldiers had on April 30, also shot and killed Noel Chigbu, a businessman at a checkpoint in Amakohia for allegedly violating "checkpoint rules".

⑥ This was barely five days after soldiers had also shot and killed a first year student of the Imo State University, Divine Nwaneri, at a checkpoint close to the Government House, Owerri.

The deceased eldest brother and spokesperson for the family, Tobechi Chigbu, told our correspondent that the soldiers at Amakohia fly-over in Owerri killed his younger brother around 10 p.m. on that fateful Friday.

He disclosed that Noel was shot dead the same day he took delivery of his new car, a Toyota Camry, and was driving home after dropping his friend.

Tobechi further revealed that the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of operations in the state was the one who told the family that the soldiers said they shot him because he "violated their checkpoint rule."

He said: "Noel is one of my siblings. He would have been 39 by May 18, but unfortunately, he was shot dead on the day he took the delivery of his new vehicle. His corpse was dumped at FMC in Owerri by the soldiers who killed him. The Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of operations told us that the military men who brought his car to the command headquarters said that they killed him for violating their checkpoint rule."

The distraught elder brother of the deceased vowed that the family is going to make sure that the identity of the military men who killed his brother were identified

and prosecuted.

"The DCP in charge of operations told us that soldiers brought the vehicle about 1am on Saturday. The soldiers dropped his phone, the car key and a bunch of keys; that of his house keys with the police. He also said that the military guys dropped N5,400, belonging to my brother."

"At first, he said that the military men didn't want to make any statement, but the police insisted and reluctantly in a quarter page sheet the soldiers wrote that the owner of the vehicle which is my brother violated their checkpoint rule and they shut and killed him. They also wrote that the relatives of the owner of the vehicle should be referred to FMC in Owerri if they come."

"The DCP asked us to go to the morgue and that we shouldn't bother going to the emergency unit of the hospital. That was when we knew that he was dead. The DCP then handed me over the money, his phone and the keys and I took a photograph with him."

"At FMC, we discovered that the military men who killed him refused to register him properly and the attendant said they were even threatening them. When we uncovered his body we saw two bullet holes at the back of his head and one bullet hole at the back side of his cheeks region. The bullet is still in his body as we speak," Tobechi narrated.

In the case of Casmir Ibe, he was on his way to buy a casket for the burial of his father-in-law when he was arrested alongside four other young men by the police, hours after gunmen had set ablaze the Orji Police Division, Owerri, on Tuesday, May 24.

Ibe, who had arrived the state the previous day from Rivers State where he works with an oil firm, was arrested and immediately paraded as one of the gunmen who had set ablaze the Orji Police Division and he and others, were reportedly taken to the Force headquarters, Abuja.

Casmir's elder brother, Chin-edu told our correspondent the whole episode was laughable and smacked of lack of professionalism on the part of the police, to have tagged his brother who had verifiable means of livelihood as a bandit.

However, military authorities in the state maintained sealed lips on the issues of intimidation, harassment, indiscriminate arrest, and killings of innocent citizens of the state.

Imo police spokesman, Bala Elkana denied any indiscriminate arrests by the police, explaining that what they were doing was driven by intelligence-gathering.

"We can't just be arresting people, I don't know of any indiscriminate arrest, but what we are doing is intelligence-driven, we arrest

people based on information available to us, those saying that those we arrested are their relations, who does not have a relation, everybody has a relation", Elkana said.

Investigations by our correspondent revealed that Owerri residents now observe a kind of a self-imposed curfew as most of them are usually seen rushing back to their homes as early as 6:00p.m, for fear of being arrested by security agents and tagged as ESN/IPOB members. They also want to avoid being victims of stray bullets from sporadic shootings by the security agents who indulge in "gun warning".

Patrick Ohanele who operates a bar at the Work Bank area of the capital metropolis lamented over current poor sales in the state.

Food vendors around popular resorts and clubs in Owerri also lament over low patronage as a consequence of the prevailing security situation, which has crippled night life.

Battle against gunmen not yielding result in Abia

The battle against the purported unknown gunmen is yielding little or no fruit in Abia State. Although the State Commissioner for Information, Chief John Okiyi-Kalu in a recent interview, explained that the state government had put measures in place to checkmate activities of the said unknown gunmen, yet these men carry out incessant attacks on police formations and other public buildings with military precision and success.

As at the last count, despite the claim by the police and state government of putting in place plans to neutralize their activities, over 11 police formations, including INEC offices and others, had been razed and some policemen killed. The attacks have remained a reoccurring decimal.

⑥ On May 29, the state CID building was completely razed by gunmen, who also killed two Inspectors of Police. The following day, the police through the PPRO, Geoffrey Ogbonna, informed that eight of the hoodlums were equally gunned down by security agents.

However, people disputed the police version, saying that those killed knew nothing about the burning of the police building.

A woman, who gave her name as Mrs Edith told Sunday Sun of how her two children, Obinna and Anthony, were marched out of their house on Saturday night at the Ugwunchara area of Umuahia (axis of the burnt state CID) and killed by security agents.

"The elderly one, Obinna, just came back from work that Saturday evening, while his younger brother, Anthony was lying down inside our room, all of a sudden, some security men in uniform,

broke into our room, forced out the two boys and shot them dead before our eyes.

"As I speak with you, two of my sons are in the mortuary for not doing anything wrong", she sobbed.

An Umuahia-based cleric who wouldn't want his name mentioned for security reasons, accused the police of being economical with the truth.

⑥ He said: "These are responsible men that police and army went to their houses and jumped through the fence at 9:00p.m on Saturday, six hours after the CID invaders had gone. They took them away before the women in the yard, only for people to see them assassinated in cold blood yesterday (Sunday)."

"It is unfortunate that after the incident, the Police PRO, Geoffrey Ogbonna criminally turned around to claim that they were the gunmen they killed on crossfire. Their families as eyewitnesses are here crying for the intervention of government."

The cleric called on the Abia government to defend the youths and the people of the state, noting that if nothing was done, "there is going to be the cleansing of our youths".

⑥ Another resident who gave her name as Amarachi also alluded to this, alleging that the tricycle operator claimed to have been killed during crossfire, was actually shot dead in an area that had nothing to do with the Saturday incident.

Gunmen ran over the home of prominent Ohafia son in Abia State, Chief O.K. Ugba and destroyed all within sight.

According to Ugba's brother, his offence was that he built a house in his village and installed solarlights within the vicinity and the "unknown gunmen" misjudged this to mean that the man installed cameras to monitor their activities, and they struck.

The man's mansion was burnt; his fleet of cars, including a G-Wagon, BMW X6, Range Rover Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) and others were all razed.

Abia PPRO, SP Ogbonna denied knowledge of any extra-judicial killings in the state, particularly that of Ugwunchara.

Anambra residents count losses

In Anambra State, the activities of gunmen have led to loss of lives and property in different parts of the state. Many police stations and public facilities have also been burnt down even as over 15 security operatives have been killed.

Also, the gunmen destroyed security vehicles and carted away guns and other security equipment belonging to the police, military and other security operatives who were felled.

The last two attacks on public facilities and security formations in the state were the ones on the headquarters of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Awka, the State capital, and a military checkpoint in Ihiala LGA.

The Ihiala incident happened at a checkpoint mounted along the Onitsha-Owerri Road and five soldiers were feared killed even as their patrol vehicle was set ablaze by the gunmen.

Commissioner of Police in the state, CP Chris Owolabi, said that his men recorded a major success as they were able to repel the criminals when they attacked INEC.

He said that three of the gunmen's vehicles were demolished and some firearms recovered from them.

He added that the police were already combing hospitals and re-

mote areas looking for the fleeing hoodlums.

Owolabi said: "In the onset, there was an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) thrown into the place which exploded at the charge room of 'B' Division and set the room on fire. But we all knew that it was a decoy to attack INEC."

"So, we proceeded to the INEC where we were able to engage the hoodlums with the three vehicles they came with. We demolished the three vehicles which made them scamper for safety."

"And we recovered quite a number of firearms from them. We recovered about six pump actions, one G2 rifle and one AK rifle. Investigations are still ongoing because it seems the developments are changing."

Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC) in the state, Dr Nkwachukwu Oji, said that although their collation centre, vehicles and stores were burnt, it was not a major damage for the commission.

"It is not a major damage. So, we thank God. I think that the police were able to do their job effectively. The areas that were affected were the areas we can easily recover. We are still taking stock of what we lost", Oji said.

A victim of the gunmen's attack, who works in a filling station, narrated that when the hoodlums arrived at Awka, they first visited their filling station and took some petroleum products and also robbed them of money and phones.

Meanwhile, the Police Public Relations Officer in the state, DSP Ikenga Tochukwu, could not provide answers when asked about other efforts being made by the police to contain the gunmen especially with regards to how the fight has fared in the state so far.

He could not also respond to enquiries on the challenges being faced by the police in this fight against gunmen; and perhaps, the specific areas where the command wants the public to step in and assist it.

Reprieve for 6 wrongly labelled "unknown gunmen"

Meanwhile, some six innocent citizens of Imo State who were wrongly arrested and falsely labelled by the State Police Command have been released. Five of the six regained their freedom late at night on Thursday, June 3, from the Imo State CID headquarters and Owerri Correctional Centre headquarters, where they were detained.

The five newly freed innocent citizens are: Smith Amadioku, Casmir Ugbor, Ojukwu Ukonu, Emeka Mbonu and Ikechukwu Okomah.

A statement by the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety), based in Onitsha, Anambra State said: "They were wrongly arrested on 12th, 13th, 14th, 15th and 19th May 2021, respectively; and publicly paraded on 28th May 2021 and falsely labelled "ESN hoodlums that attacked Imo State Correctional/Prisons Headquarters and others".

Intersociety in the statement noted that their case clearly showed the extent that citizens arrested non-violently and taken into custody at the State CID had been shot and killed or tortured to death with their bodies permanently disfigured to avoid traces.

Similarly, it listed other persons wrongly detained and branded ESN/IPOB members in Owerri, Imo State to include, Casmir Ibegbulem, released on Tuesday, June 1, 2021; "Citizen Casmir

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Ibegbulem (an oil company staff in Bayelsa State), alongside Citizens Chinonso John (an Owerri based barber), Chukwudi Okoro (Orji-Owerri based shuttle bus owner/transporter), Chigamezu Sebastian (Owerri Timber Market trader/plumber) and Daberechi Alozie (25 years old apprentice aluminum fabricator with Oceanic Aluminum, Owerri) were arrested on 25th May 2021 at Orji part of Owerri and later paraded. Two days later, on 27th May, 2021, they were taken to the Force headquarters, Abuja, from where Citizen Ibegbulem was forced to 'buy his freedom' with whopping N1.5m after five days of detention."

According to Emeka Umeababasi, Board Chairman of Intersociety, Ibegbulem, had on his release, made an audio voice message of gratitude and revelation of what he went through and saw at the State CID, Owerri and the Force Headquarters, Abuja.

His account included how he was allegedly brought out from cell by his Investigating Police Officer (IPO) at the Force headquarters and allegedly asked if he was ready to pay N10m for his freedom as "an oil company staff".

Also revealed in the audio was how he bargained and priced "N800, 000", forcing him to be thrown back into the cell in anger by the IPO.

He further disclosed in the recorded audio how scores of detained citizens labelled "IPOB/ESN members" were routinely shot and killed extra-judicially or tortured to death.

The group, therefore, demanded that the alleged N1.5 million collected must be returned to Ibegbulem's family and there shall be total discontinuation of such extortion and custodial torture and killings or forced disappearances and unlawful executions by the Force headquarters.

Intersociety had on May 31, released a special report chronicling how soldiers, police and other security operatives hatefully and falsely labelled innocent citizens and spilled their bloods in the East and on June 2, the IGP, Chairman of Police Service Commission and Commissioner of Police, Imo State Command were written to and strongly called upon to investigate, review, release, discharge and acquit all the innocent citizens wrongly arrested, detained and falsely labelled.

Sunday Sun learnt that six of the 12 names and photos of the arrested and falsely labelled innocent citizens included in the letter, were eventually freed while six are still remaining.

In a related development, the Owerri branch of Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) had after its recent meeting with the Commissioner of Police and the Security Adviser to the Governor, opened a help desk at the Bar Centre from June 4, to collate the names of innocent Imolites unjustly arrested and detained by the Nigeria Police for the purpose of securing their release.

A statement by the Publicity Secretary, Uzor Enwere said that the Bar, through its Committee on Human Rights will anchor and co-ordinate the help desk.

It explained that complaints received will be taken up with the appropriate quarters in order to secure the release of these detainees; considering that the courts were not sitting owing to the strike by



the judiciary staff union of Nigeria (JUSUN).

An Owerri-based legal practitioner said: "This approach is dictated by the precarious security situation in Imo State at the moment which has the semblance of war situation."

Fear of 'unknown' gunmen grips Ebonyi, Enugu

Sunday Sun findings showed that gunmen became more daring in Enugu and Ebonyi states in the last three months.

In the night of Monday, April 26, gunmen attacked a military checkpoint at Amasiri Junction in Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, killing two soldiers. Two gunmen were also reportedly killed.

Few days after, hoodlums again attacked the Abaomege Police Station in nearby Onicha Local Government Area of the state and killed an officer attached to the station.

Similarly, two policemen on duty at a checkpoint around the Onuebonyi area of Abakaliki were recently mauled down by gunmen and their patrol vehicle set ablaze.

Prior to this period, police stations at Onueke, Ezza South Local Government, Ebonyi LGA and Isu in Onicha LGA were also attacked.

Like in Imo, Ebonyi governor, David Umahi blamed hoodlums and desperate opposition leaders for the security crisis in his state.

Umahi said that contrary to the belief in some quarters that the IPOB and its security arm, ESN, were responsible for the killings of security agents and burning of government facilities in the state that desperate opposition leaders from Ebonyi were indeed behind the mayhem.

He alleged that some desperate opposition politicians were sponsoring hoodlums, thugs and bandits to cause crisis just to discredit his government and to score cheap political points.

The governor dropped the bombshell when the Assistant Inspector General of Police in charge of Zone 9, Etim Okon, paid him a courtesy visit at the Government House, Abakaliki recently.

Umahi said: "Let me condemn very seriously the killing of security agents in this state. I have said it severally that burning of police stations and INEC offices will never help anyone. Yesterday, two INEC offices in Ezza North and Ebonyi local government areas were razed, and there was also an attempt to burn a filling station that I owned before now two days ago, and attempted assassination of the publicity secretary of APC."



He stated that the allegation by the opposition in the state that the killing of the police was masterminded by the Ebubeagu security outfit, meant that they knew about the killings.

"So, don't look far. These are the people fighting you; these are the people killing you. These are the truth. If you want to find out, go to their Facebook and check," Umahi told the AIG.

However, three of the persons accused by the governor namely, Ali Odefa, Linus Okorie and Chidiebere Egwu, have since dismissed the allegation, describing it as false and politically motivated.

They claimed that Umahi made the allegation against them because they refused to defect to the APC with him.

Regardless, Ebonyi has been the worst hit by suspected herdsmen attacks this year alone. Barely a week ago, suspected herdsmen had attacked some Ebonyi communities living in the border area of Benue, killing at least 30 persons.

The three communities attacked which share boundary with Ado Local Government Area of Benue State include Odoke, Ndiobasi and Obakotara communities in Ebonyi

local government area of the state.

A resident of the area, Uchenna Okpokwu, said that the herdsmen invaded the area with guns and machetes.

"They came into Ndiobasi village and started slaughtering the people. After slaughtering them, they entered Odoke, from that Odoke, they went to Obapta", he bemoaned.

Two other gory attacks had happened in a two-week sequence; the massacre of Egedegede community in Ishielu Local Government Area of the state by Fulani herdsmen in addition to the latest killings in Umuoguduakpu Ngbo in Ohaukwu LGA.

The bloody attack at Egedegede Junction in Egedegede community of Ishielu LGA had spread pain, sorrow and anguish in the surrounding communities of Obegagu, Amazu, Umuhufu and Nkalaba, as well as Ehamufu in Enugu State. No fewer than 20 persons were killed by AK-47 wielding Fulani marauders, while four persons were reportedly killed in the Fulani herdsmen violent attack on Ngbo community.

Meanwhile, Governor Umahi on May 2, urged bandits and

criminals terrorising the state to lay down their arms and come for negotiations, stressing that his administration was ready to assuage their grievances.

He also promised that his government will ensure their comprehensive empowerment for the sake of peace and progress of the state.

Also, the attention of gunmen seems to have shifted to Enugu State lately with the growing cases of attacks.

Residents of the state woke up on Monday, May 17, to hear that the Independence Layout State headquarters of INEC was attacked by hoodlums on Sunday night.

The gunmen whose mission was to set the INEC state headquarters on fire only succeeded in burning about six Hilux vans and some sections of the building before the quick intervention of a combined team of security agents and fire fighters, who helped in dispersing them and controlling the situation.

Another office of the INEC in Ibeagwa-aka, Igboeze South Local Government Area of Enugu State was set ablaze by unidentified persons.

The incident had brought to three the number of INEC offices so far attacked in the state in less than a month. The INEC office in Obollo-Afor, Udenu LGA was the first to be attacked with huge damage recorded.

On May 25, the Iwollo community in Ezeagu LGA of Enugu State was thrown into deep mourning, following the attack on the Police Division in the area by gunmen. The attack claimed the lives of four policemen and saw total destruction of the station.

Two out of the four killed policemen were said to be natives of the area and a neighbouring community.

Also razed were a commuter bus and many motorcycles parked inside the station.

A native of the community said they were woken up by the heavy shooting, "and by the time we came here when the shooting had died down we saw four of the policemen already dead and the whole place burnt."

Governor Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi and the Commissioner of Police, Ndatsu Aliyu who visited the place expressed sadness over the heinous act.

Ugwuanyi who condoled with the families of the slain policemen, also ordered for the immediate reconstruction of the damaged police buildings, just as the government replaced the station's patrol van.

This was the second attack targeted at a police station in the state after three policemen were killed at the Adani Police Station in Uzo-Uwani LGA in April.

In the orgy of attacks in the state, some natives had been murdered in Igga, Uzo-Uwani LGA of the state in March this year.

The latest of the bad news from Enugu was the brutal murder of a retired judge of Enugu State High Court, Justice Stanley Nnaji, on Sunday, May 30 by yet-to-be identified gunmen in Enugu.

Nnaji who hailed from Mbu in Isi-Uzo LGA of the state was dragged down from his black Mercedes Benz jeep and shot at close range by his assailants along Okpara Avenue, close to Ebeano Tunnel.

The gory video of the incident made by an eyewitness from a nearby building has continued to trend on the social media.