

Imo's day of anarchy

- Youths kill 2 soldiers, destroy operational vehicles
- Soldiers kill 1, burn over 75 houses, loot property

From **George Onyejiuwa**, Owerri

HUNDREDS of indigenes of Umuokwu Aborsi autonomous community in Izombe, Oguta council area of Imo State, have been rendered homeless following the invasion by soldiers of the 34 Artillery Brigade, Obinze, in a reprisal for the death of their colleagues allegedly killed during a confrontation between the youths on October 8, 2021.

The irate soldiers, who came in over 30 Hilux vehicles and armoured trucks, shooting at random, burnt over 75 houses, vehicles, motorcycles and looted the property of the hapless residents of the community. The soldiers allegedly invaded Izombe to avenge the death of two of their colleagues who were said to have been killed in a retaliation by youths of the community following the killing of one of them by a soldier protecting illegal bunkerers there.

Investigations by Daily Sun revealed that trouble started on that fateful Friday, October 8, when the youths of Umuokwu Izombe asked the youths of Eziorso and Orsuobodo communities to remove the illegal tolls mounted by the youths of Eziorso for the bunkerers. And as a result of the disagreement, Eziorso youths reported to some of the soldiers, who had allegedly been giving them protection. The soldiers allegedly promptly arrived Umuokwu Aborsi Izombe community and confronted the youths.

It was further learnt that, during the confrontation, the soldiers shot dead Chukwunonso Iherue, a young man from Umuokwu.

This, a community source said, infuriated the youths and they chased the soldiers, who tried to flee the community. Two of the soldiers were lynched by the irate youths.

A retired civil servant and a prominent indigene of the community, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, described the incident as unfortunate, adding that residents of the community have fled to neighbouring communities to avoid being killed in the reprisal by the invading soldiers.

He said: "It is terrible; every body has gone into hiding, including myself, to avoid being killed by the invading soldiers who were shooting sporadically. It is quite unfortunate."

Speaking on the development, a community leader from Umuokwu village, Mr. James Imo, claimed that more than 70 houses have been burnt down: "I was informed that two military men were killed and their vehicle set ablaze after they had killed one young man, Chukwunonso Iherue, in Umuokwu-Izombe.



• **Burnt buildings in Umuokwu Izombe**

"The problem arose from misunderstanding between the youths and soldiers over crude oil bunkering activities," Imo said.

He alleged that the angry youths fought back, overpowered the soldiers, took their guns and burnt their vehicle.

Speaking on the incident, the traditional ruler of Aborsi-Izombe, Eze Pius Muforo, said government should thoroughly investigate the main cause of the incident.

The traditional ruler said: "I gathered that one youth and two soldiers were killed. It was very condemnable that human lives were lost in the incident and I sincerely sympathize with the families of the dead.

"Contrary to earlier reports, my palace was spared, but my subjects' houses were badly affected and I am not happy about it."

The traditional ruler lamented that over 70 houses, 15 vehicles and 25 motorcycles parked in some houses were gutted, even as economic plants were destroyed.

He added that, "This community has been peaceful; we don't merit the punishment meted on us. All the victims never took part in bunkering business."

The traditional ruler, who expressed concern over the increasing activities of bunkerers in the area, urged government to find urgent ways of stopping oil bunkering in the area as well as find ways of meaningfully engaging the teeming youths to deter them from the nefarious trade.

A victim, Mr. Ifeanyichukwu Onyeukwu, who described the incident as a "tragedy" and a "big loss," said the community had never experienced such an attack.

He said: "It was like a war situation. They came here with about 30 Hilux vans and three armoured tanks. I hid in the bush, watching

from a distance how they threw grenades into our buildings.

"We lost everything, including clothes, phones, electrical appliances and money.

"Particularly, my cousin lost over N500,000 cash while his wife also lost some amount belonging to a church group she belongs to.

"I am not part of the bunkering business going on in the area, but I am surprised that the problem caused by a few individuals affected me and virtually everyone in the village."

Another victim, Mr. Victus Nwadike, a retired driver with the Court of Appeal, said he and his brothers lost three cars and two buildings in the attack.

"On Friday morning, I left my home for Mbaize. I later received several calls that there was trouble at Izombe and I should not return home. I later came on Saturday to discover that three cars in my compound had been burnt down. My house and that of my brother were burnt as well.

"We couldn't save anything from the houses. Now, all my sweat over the years has been turned to rubble," he lamented.

Nwadike, who said, since retirement, he only relies on his pension and sale of his farm produce, also appealed to government to come to his aid.

"I know that a youth and two army officers were killed, but the army overreacted," he added.

However, Governor Hope Uzodinma, who visited the community last Tuesday on assessment trip, blamed what happened on dissidents and criminally-minded youths from the community.

Addressing traditional, political, business, women and youth leaders at Central School, Aborshi, the governor expressed shock at the level of destruction and tasked all on peace or be ready for the consequences of recourse to violence. Uzodinma told the people that a situation where criminal-minded young men have taken over affairs in the community and become uncontrollable is not good and "that is why the communities here are suffering ztoday."

He said, "What happened should be blamed on the activities of dissident and criminal-minded youths who have decided to make themselves lawless, including going to the extreme of attacking the security operatives who were sent to the community to protect them."

However, Uzodinma stated that his administration would set up a committee to assess the level of destruction and find a way of assisting the victims.



• **Burnt car in Izombe**