

Insight

Untold story of 5 engineers who disappeared in Ebonyi

• I've been unable to function, says director's wife
• We're still investigating – Police

By Our Reporters

THE lamentation of Mrs. Patricia Onyemeh, a businesswoman, over the disappearance of her husband, Engineer Nelson Onyemeh since November 3, tells the story of agony.

The heartbroken woman said: "Since my husband disappeared, life has been unbearable. The entire family is shattered. I've not been able to sleep or eat. In fact, I've not been able to function. It has been terrible. When the head of the household is no more there, things can never be the same."

Patricia is not alone in this feeling. Four other families are also weeping in the valley of tears. They are united in grief, not knowing whether their breadwinners will ever come back to them. For the five families, life has become a nightmare.

The missing engineers are Nelson Onyemeh, 64, an indigene of Okohia, Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra; Ernest Edeani, 47, from Akpawf, Nkanu East LGA, Enugu State; Ikechukwu Ejiofor, 56, from Odumodu, Umunya, Oyi LGA of Anambra State; Samuel Aneke, 62, an indigene of Awkunanaw, Enugu South LGA, Enugu and Stanley Ebuka Nwazulum, 33, who hails from Amawbia South, Anambra State.

On November 3, Onyemeh, a director and partner at Nelan Consultants, Enugu, led four other engineers on a routine construction supervision job. The job was the construction of the Ebonyi Ring Road, a \$150 million African Development Bank (ADB) project where Nelan Consultants acts as consultants. The project traverses some communities in the state, including Effium, notorious for communal crises.

Ebonyi's killing field

The renewed skirmishes in Effium community between Ezza-Effium and Effium people of Ohaukwu Local Government Area of Ebonyi State has claimed countless lives since January 23, this year.

In a space of one week, no fewer than 50 persons were 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.

Though different in many ways, Effium people and their Ezza-Effium brothers had coexisted 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 peaceful people against one another.

Daily 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 at least 10 persons were killed while homes and property were razed.



• Onyemeh



• Ejiofor



• Edeani



• Nwazulum



• Aneke

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 LGA 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 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, the Ezza-Effium wield the legislative power. This heightened the supremacy battle.

While many, especially those not privy to the goings-on in the community, accused the leaders of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) of instigating crisis in the

community, investigation showed 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.

It was reliably gathered that the main contention was the 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.

While the tension generated by the issue persisted, the Council 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.

Since then, the community has remained a ghost of itself with mindless killings and destruction being perpetuated by both sides.

The five engineers got safely to the site at about 1pm that day. According to Patricia, the five engineers "were last heard from at about 3pm on November 3. My husband was to hold a meeting with one Okeh at 3pm on November 3 after the site visit to discuss some accommodation issues. I have not heard or seen my husband till date.

In fact, the Toyota Hilux with registration number, ERR 001 EB, they traveled in also disappeared with them till this moment."

The vehicle bore the inscription, Abakaliki Ring Road project, across both sides. Incidentally, a surveyor was supposed to go with the engineers but the vehicle could not take him. So, he drove to the site alone and came back. The whereabouts of the five engineers remain unknown.

The families of the missing engineers have been meeting once in a week to reflect on the tragedy that hit them and exchange ideas and information, if any.

Daily Sun met the grieving families last week and emotions ran high. Tears flowed freely even as many are still in shock, not knowing what to make of the situation.

"I am very confused. The governor made a pronouncement that the men are dead. If they are dead, let them show us their bodies so we can give them decent burial. But if they are alive, let them help us to find them. I am so confused. The governor's pronouncement threw me off balance. It was just like a bolt out of the blues. The families were not informed; nobody was informed. I just saw it in the public domain," Patricia further lamented.

Patricia's last son, Obinna, 22, who was also at the meeting, is devastated. He said: "I work in Lagos. As soon as I heard, I had to come back. I haven't been able to focus and work for weeks. This has devastated us. The biggest shock of all was the press statement by Governor Dave. We got the news from the social media. It was so insensitive of him not to have reached out to the families first before putting something like that out. I was awake with my mother crying all through the night because of this news. It threw all of us off balance. At this point, we don't know what to believe. We don't know if we can believe what he is saying but at this point, we know that there are two things that can happen. It's either they come back alive and intact or they come out dead and they give us their dead bodies. These are the only possible outcomes. We are

"We want to move even a step forward toward resolving the abduction issue." -Koichi Haraguchi



•Ezeagwu



•Loveth



•Onyemeh



•Emmanuel



•Angus Ejiofor



•Madam Nwazulum

praying seriously that they come out alive."

For Mrs Loveth Edeani, a young mother of four, the disappearance of her 47-year-old husband is too heavy a burden to bear. It has left a sour taste in her mouth.

She told Daily Sun: "I really don't know how to describe what is happening. Somebody left the house and you are expecting the person to come back only for you to hear that that person is nowhere to be found. I was trying his mobile number and it was switched off. I got his boss' number (Engr Nelson) and called him but it was not connecting too. That was how I became apprehensive. So, I started reaching out to other people working in the company and got to know that they were missing.

"The kids and I were thrown into confusion. I don't pray for such a day to come again. Since then, it's me and the children. All of them are going to school: two of them are in secondary school and the rest are in primary school. You should understand how it is in Nigeria. The children have been crying, asking after their father. They have been fallen sick, from one person to the other.

"It's by the grace of God that you saw me here. I read the news on the social media that my husband and his colleagues had been buried like rats in the bush. There was no contact with us. They just announced it like that. I'm a teacher and I broke down in the school when I heard the news. They had to call my people to come and pick me. My prayer is that they should do whatever it takes to bring them back. They have been suffering. Can you imagine somebody who left his house for work and hasn't returned after one month and five days? We don't know the condition they are in. I don't understand. I alone cannot cater for the children, considering how the economy is. We've been managing all the while let alone when the other person is not around. Emotionally, I am not even stable right now."

Indeed, it was the same tale of anguish from all the representatives of the affected families. Stanley Ebuka Nwazulum's parents painted a pathetic picture as they explained the pain in their hearts. His mother volunteered that her illness had worsened following the

disappearance of her son, who is still single.

Mr Angus Ejiofor, elder brother to Ikechukwu Ejiofor, said the family had been devastated since he went missing.

"We have been meeting and praying to the owner of life to spare their lives so that they come back to their families. Those holding them should leave them because they have suffered enough. All the families are in turmoil, he said."

Mr. Emmanuel Nwabueze Aneke, elder brother to Samuel Aneke, also expressed worry about the development. He said that his aged mother is greatly distressed, disclosing the woman had buried three of her 10 children and wouldn't want to bury another.

Meanwhile, in a press statement, Patricia expressed reservation about the efforts directed at rescuing the abducted engineers as well as alleged attempts to interfere with Nelan Consultants assignment as per the contract ADB. She disclosed some of the things her husband was not satisfied with regarding the execution of the Ebonyi Ring Project.

Benjamin Ezeagwu, a principal partner in Nelan Consultants, offered perspective on the issue. He said: "On November 10, 2021, our principal partner, Engr Nelson Onyemeh, along with four other engineers, went to the site with the various contractors. The engineers are going to act as what we call resident engineers to the contractors. They got there around 1pm but at about 3pm, they made the last call; somebody called them from Abakaliki. And that was the last we heard of five of them till today.

"Since then, we have been all over the place trying to see what we can find. But that evening, we called the Ebonyi State government office that takes care of that project to inform them that we have not heard from the team that went there. And they said they would get in touch with the governor that night.

"Eventually, they said the governor had dispatched his CSO to find out what the position was. The following day being November 4, I went to Abakaliki and met with the coordinator of that project, because such projects have what they call state project implementation unit (SPIU). In this case, it is run by one Engr Felix

of disagreement on the administration of the project. For instance, the major issues were that officials of the government of Ebonyi State wanted to be issuing instructions directly to the contractors, which is at variance with the terms of the contract. They wanted meetings to be held in government office, which ADB considers as interference. The project was supposed to have engineering laboratories for each site but the government didn't want that. They wanted to be issuing final certificates to the contractors, which is at variance with standard practice. All these our firm refused because if we do that, ADB might blacklist us and when ADB blacklists you, all the donor agencies will blacklist you, including the World Bank, the Islamic bank and others.

"Another curious thing is that officials of the government wanted us to be at the back seat of the project while they will conduct the administration. For instance, they didn't want Nelan Consultants engineers to be the people that are generating all the questions and answers as per the project, which is totally wrong."

Ezeagwu said a new twist developed shortly after. He said: "On November 10, seven days after the abduction happened, they wrote us a query, that we absented from site, that we abandoned site. This was seven days after we lost five of our staff and their vehicle there.

"On November 12, they said we should arrange and bring another set of staff to continue the project. We wrote them back that there was no way we could do that because nobody will agree to do that. In fact, some of our staff that were supposed to join in that project did not agree to continue with it until they find out what happened to the people who went there. So, later, a state official approached me and said that they could arrange and get some engineers from around Ebonyi there to continue with the project. At the end of the day, they will send all their reports for us to sign for them.

"First of all, seven days after the abduction, nobody asked us how we were faring. Neither did they come back to tell us the efforts they were making to rescue our engineers. The thing that was paramount in their mind was for us to arrange and continue with the project, warning us that we had abandoned site. We found that statement very repulsive and insensitive. In fact, we didn't want to reply to that letter but we said it was necessary to reply them so that they will know how I felt about some of those things. In a nutshell, that is what we are passing through. We've finally decided to communicate with ADB and tell them what has happened and why we may not be in the right frame of mind to continue with the project.

"Incidentally, my cousin and partner, Nelson, was having discussions about this project with his wife, which she might like to share with you. The day the government invited us, we later found out it was a stakeholders meeting for all the communities that the road passes through. The only thing is that they later called the families of the abducted engineers to an office to tell them the effort being made."

Asked why the story of the abduction did not come with a bang when it happened, Ezeagwu explained that security operatives asked them to lie low a little for them to see what they can find before taking the matter to the press.

"It looks like government was blaming the victims, that they should have told them that they were coming to Ebonyi so that they will arrange security for them. But then, we've been on this project for more than one year and our team goes there at least two times every week and we never had any issue. So, somebody saying that we should have told them that we needed security is curious because we have never been going there with security. In fact, that particular day, our surveyor was supposed to go with them but there was no space in the car for him, so he went alone. He went there and came back.

(Continued on www.sunnewsonline.com)