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15 killed, 3,000 displaced in Cross River communal clashes

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age warriors going for war



Survivors of a communal clash

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From **Judex Okoro**, Calabar

Ahead of the planting season in Cross River State, there has been renewed outbreak of communal clashes between border communities. More than 15 persons have been reportedly killed and over 3,000 persons rendered homeless.



Some of the burnt houses

These clashes, which occurred between the two brotherly communities of Alesi and Ochon in Obubra and Ikom local government areas, have resulted in destruction of property, including public institutions, worth millions of naira and some villages sacked. These man-made disasters have brought hardship to the residents.

The struggle over a parcel of land has become a perennial problem in the state and become so intense that, at the beginning of every planting season families relocate their children to urban areas for fear of violence, which always culminates in a bloodbath.

Statistics from State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) showed that 16 of the 18 local government areas in the state, including Odukpani, Akamkpa, Biase, Yakurr, Abi, Obubra, Ikom, Etung, Boki, Obudu, Obanliku, Yala and Bekwarra, have had a taste of communal war leading to loss of lives.

According to the former director-general of SEMA, John Inaku, over 5,000 houses have been destroyed and over 20,000 persons displaced in various communal clashes across the state, adding that secondary schools, private clinics, filling station and residential buildings have been razed.

Investigations by Daily Sun showed that Ikot Okpora and Ayaba Ojor, as well as Etono II and Biakpang communities in Biase LGA, Onyadama and Inyima, Obubra and Owakande villages in Obubra, Mkpani and Nko communities in Yakurr LGA and Urugbam and Abanwan in Erei community in Biase LGA have been engaged in perennial land disputes.

farmland involving two neighbours, Ochon in Obubra and Alesi in Ikom, despite common matrimonial and ancestral affinities spanning centuries.

The clash reached its climax when the two brotherly communities of Ochon and Alesi went into a full-scale war on Monday, March 7, 2022, leading to wanton destruction of property and killing of about 15 persons, with thousands displaced.

Investigations by Daily Sun revealed that at least 15 persons lost their lives in the clash but, according to the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), only eight persons died in the communal clash.

An eyewitness, Innocent Okpang, said, though the crisis between the communities started long ago, trouble resurfaced recently when the Alesi people raised the alarm that Ochon youths had been harvesting their farm produce, including yam tubers, cocoyam and plantain, since January.

According to him, when the Alesi tried resisting such activities, the Ochon started to hunt them down, especially those who were drivers, killing and burning their vehicles. He added that, this time, the Alesi could not stand it any longer and they took revenge. This led to the blocking of the Ikom-Calabar federal highway from the Obubra Ikom axis.

The witness stated that soldiers from the Edor Barracks came to the scene and tried to restore peace but the irate youths resisted the soldiers, prompting the troops to shoot at them to clear the roads, with two persons reportedly killed in the process.

However, according to the South-South coordinator of NEMA, Mr. Godwin Tepikor, eight persons died in a communal clash between Alesi and Ochon communities.

Speaking shortly after an on-the-spot assessment of the destruction in both communities recently, Tepikor said the crisis broke out as a result of a land dispute between the neighbouring communities and disclosed that no fewer than 2,008 persons had been displaced from their ancestral homes.

He said: “The crisis that erupted between Ochon and Alesi communities in Obubra and Ikom local government areas claimed the lives of eight persons, four were injured on both sides and over 2,008 displaced.

“Several buildings and household property were destroyed in the process. The affected persons were scattered among neighbouring communities within the local government areas of the state.”

Bemoaning the loss, Chief Micheal Ojoor of Alesi said the community had not recovered from the communal war and pleaded for government intervention. In an emotion-laden tone, Ojoor, whose house was burnt in Alesi, said, since the incident, he and his family have not recovered as all their fortunes have been turned to rubble.

A lady who claimed to have lost a sibling in the conflict, Josephine Oko, said: “I lost my younger sister who went to farm and never returned. She was killed by the Wanihem warriors. And since then we have been mourning her. Our mother has not recovered from the shock. I doubt if we can relate well again with our brothers from Ochon after what they did to us. Even generations yet unborn will never forget the destruction visited on us because of common farmland.”

Another victim from Ochon, Abang Johnson, said he lost his only house in the clash, as the youths of Alesi invaded his community even as their farms were destroyed. He called on government to find a lasting solution to the seasonal clashes.

Government reads the riot act

Warning warring communities during an assessment visit, the Deputy Governor, Prof. Ivara Esu, said government would not hesitate to apply the full weight of the law on any individual, no matter how highly placed, who is found culpable of fomenting trouble in any community in the state.

Expressing displeasure at the level of destruction of property, infrastructure, primary school, palm oil factories in the areas as well as economic trees, Esu lamented the resort to war and violent confrontation, instead of dialogue as a means to peaceful resolution of differences among and between people.

He said: “Henceforth, the present administration in the state will not extend the latitude of its patience and look the other way when a few disgruntled elements derive pleasure in the destruction of life and property at the slightest provocation. Life is sacred and no one has the right to take it while hiding under unjustifiable excuses.

“The state government is going to ensure that a permanent boundary demarcation is put in place within the border communities.”

Equally expressing dismay at the loss of lives and properties worth millions of naira, the permanent secretary, special services Governor’s Office, Dr. Alfred Mboto, said there was no reason for a sister local government to take laws into their hands by going to war.

Mboto said it is high time they understood the causes of the crisis and proffer solutions that will restore peace, unity, growth and economic stability to the areas as communal crises which will only stunt development in both communities.

He said: “Government is not happy with some traditional rulers who know the perpetrators of crimes and illegalities yet shield them from the authorities. It was an insult to the state government for the deputy governor to visit the areas for peace keeping then shortly after he left the crisis began.”

On his part, the state security adviser central, Mr Ransome Odey, said: “The conflict cannot be totally eradicated, the state government is poised to ensure that lives and property of its citizens are properly secured.

“We call on youths who are often used as agents of social vices to desist from such act as the state government will severely deal with all culprits.”



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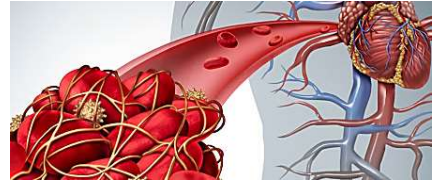
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Equally speaking, the Obubra council chairman, Mr Bassey Tom and his Íkom counterpart Mr Kingsley Egum who was represented by his vice Mrs Alice Erem-Abang said that as a council, they will keep enlightening the people on the need to maintain law and order in their communities and local government at large.



Rapheal

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