

# Ebonyi Yuletide of **blood**, sorrow

■ How gunmen terrorised state, killed US-based returnee  
■ Abduct, release others after payment of ransom

From Magnus Eze, Abakaliki

**EBONYI** State almost lost its enviable rating as the most peaceful state in the Southeast, as well as one of the most peaceful in the country few weeks ago. In the build up to Christmas and the New Year celebrations, marauding gunmen unleashed mayhem in some parts of the state, leaving in their trail tales of tears, sorrow and blood. Some lives were lost, including those of security personnel while the escapades instilled fear in the people of the state.

Despite the assurances of the State Commissioner of Police, Augustina Ogbodo that the police command would ensure peaceful celebrations, the killings continued unabated till the celebrations proper when more lives were lost.

Giving the assurance in Abakaliki, at a press briefing, the Police boss said: "Great people of Ebonyi State, the command under my watch has perfected strategies to ensure that the Christmas and New Year celebrations are hitch-free."

"The entire citizens of Ebonyi State are urged to go about their lawful duties and businesses without fear and enjoy the festive periods."

But the assurances seemingly turned to empty promises following the loss of more lives, with some of them occurring even few days to the celebrations.

The killings started in October last year at Nwogu, close to the military cantonment, where suspected rival cult groups clashed. About four persons lost their lives then. There was tension and security concerns in Abakaliki, the state capital, due to the incident.

Many residents of the state had to pay the price for the incident. Security operatives threw their dragnet, swooped on the town and arrested people indiscriminately in different places, including markets, streets, drinking points and other public places. Sunday Sun reliably gathered that most of the people had to cough out at least N20,000 before they regained their freedom. Those who could not afford the money demanded stayed in the custody of the security agents more than necessary.

During the period, security was beefed up in Abakaliki metropolis while the Abakaliki Local Government Chairman, Ebere Nwoba, took some drastic measures which included ban of unauthorised gatherings and monitoring of hotels and eatery centres.

## Hilltop/Egugwu Agbaja/Nwofe Road police killings

As the tension created by the cult killings at Nkwere axis was dying down, gunmen again in November, killed three policemen on duty at a checkpoint, while some of their lucky colleagues sustained varying degrees of injury.

The policemen were attacked at a checkpoint in front of a gas station near a bridge on Hilltop/Egugwu Agbaja/Nwofe Road in the metropolis that leads to Governor Francis Nwifuru's Ofereke Agbaja country home in Izzi Local Government Area of the state.

Police Public Relations Officer of the command, SP Onome Onovwakpoye, said the gunmen attacked police patrol team on duty at that road and killed two police-



•Eziulo, murdered US-based returnee.

men in the team.

According to her, apart from the two policemen that were killed by the hoodlums, one other policeman was critically injured in the attack.

"Today 17/11/2023, at about 08:30am, operatives of the command on patrol at Nwofe Road at the outskirts of Abakaliki were attacked by armed hoodlums with a tinted Highlander vehicle.

"Two of the operatives were fatally wounded while one is currently receiving medical treatment at the hospital.

"The Commissioner of Police, Ebonyi State Police Command, CP Augustina Ogbodo, on receiving the distress call immediately dispatched Tactical teams to the scene, who equally swung into action by giving the hoodlums a hot chase, but the hoodlums escaped.

"The Commissioner of Police also visited the scene of the incident with her management team

for on-the-spot assessment.

"She is using this medium to call on well-meaning individuals of the state to avail the Command with useful information that can lead to the arrest of the fleeing hoodlums while assuring them of round the clock visibility patrol of the nooks and crannies of the state."

## Christmas eve mayhem

Then, on the eve of Christmas, an incident that had never been witnessed in the state since its creation in 1996, happened. Gunmen invaded the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church Nkwegu in Abakaliki LGA and killed three parishioners.

Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese, Most Rev. Peter Nworie, confirmed the attack and killings which occurred during a vigil mass on the Sunday night preceding the Christmas on Monday.

Nworie who disclosed this at the Christmas service at Saint Theresa Cathedral, said the killing occurred



•CP Ogbodo

at 11:30 p.m on Sunday.

The bishop described the incident as sad and disheartening, while praying for the repose of the souls of those who were murdered.

He explained that the suspected killers invaded the church while a priest was celebrating a vigil mass service and killed the three persons and injured many others.

According to Nworie, such an unfortunate act had never happened in the church in the state.

"This is the first time such an incident has happened in the church and in Ebonyi State in general," the bishop noted.

Also, there was a dastardly attack that led to the killing of vigilantes in Izzi LGA few days to Christmas.

The hoodlums had killed three vigilantes on night duty in the area. Their bodies were still in an Abakaliki morgue where they were deposited by officials of Izzi LGA as at press time.

## New Year eve kidnap, killing

Another disturbing attack occurred on New Year, one person was killed and two others abducted when gunmen stormed Afikpo community in the southern part of the state.

According to the residents of the area, the incident happened around 8:00pm along Ndiibe Beach Road when gunmen allegedly trailed a convoy of cars entering the community and opened fire on them.

The convoy was said to be carrying some United States of America-based indigenes of Afikpo who returned for the Yuletide.

The criminals trailed the convoy which was led by one Chief Aloy Alazu and opened fire on one of the cars behind Alazu's Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV).

The shooting forced the cars to stop and the gunmen immediately whisked away the two Eziulo sisters - Chinyere and Linda, including their brother. They took them away in the vehicle alongside a boy relation of theirs who came in from Owerri.

However, the alert driver of Alazu's car refused to stop, but continued his defensive drive to escape from the gunmen. The hoodlums in a bid to stop the vehicle, shot at it repeatedly and subsequently shot the tyres.

A witness, said the brave driver managed to escape in the bullet ridden car with his boss, Alazu, who was said to be the main target of the kidnap, though he sustained bullet wounds. He was later rushed to an undisclosed hospital in Abakaliki for

medical attention.

The kidnappers thereafter zoomed off with their three abductees, but on noticing that one of the ladies, Chinyere, who also came in from U.S for Christmas holiday, was lifeless after being hit by bullets, they pushed her out of the car.

## Her body was later recovered and deposited in a mortuary

The criminal gang subsequently established contact with the family of the abductees and demanded N50 million ransom.

Few days later, the abductees were released after payment of some ransom reportedly running into millions of naira.

A source close to the family, who could not disclose more details about what transpired before they were freed, said that the victims thereafter were taken to a hospital for medical examination.

"At least, they've come back alive and we thank everybody for their prayers," the source stated.

Therefore, Some Afikpo leaders have called on security agents to do everything they can to apprehend the perpetrators of the dastard act.

In a statement jointly signed by Chief Dom Isute and Chief Emmanuel Irem, they regretted that that the hoodlums had not been apprehended weeks after they committed the crime and urged the security agents to go after them.

"We have learnt with dismay the tragic incident which occurred in the early days of this month in Afikpo that led to the loss of life of our sister and also wounding of a prominent son of Afikpo community.

"We feel saddened that such ugly situation in whatever name that it is called is never known or heard of in Afikpo and wondered how this one happened without the perpetrators being apprehended.

"We urge the security agents to beef up their watch light to ensure those who committed the crime are apprehended and prosecuted in the court of law.

"The case of abduction should not be allowed to take root in Afikpo as this will scare and discourage people especially those in the Diaspora from visiting their country home without any fear of being kidnapped.

"We are also happy that those abducted have been released. We sympathize with the bereaved family and Ehugbo (Afikpo) community as a whole and we enjoin our people to be on the security alert and report any suspicious movements in our community to security personnel," they stated.

They also condemned the payment of ransom for release of kidnap victims, saying that it may not be the best option in such situation, but will rather encourage the crime.

They stated: "We are of the opinion that the payment of ransom for the release of victims may not be the solution as this is capable of perpetuating the crime. Rather, a holistic approach involving security agents, youths and the community should be instituted to tackle this menace.

"It is regrettable that almost two weeks since the incident happened, the perpetrators are yet to be identified and brought to justice. The Association also prayed for the quick recovery of the Afikpo son shot during the abduction operation."