

Benue monarch, 2 others killed, 17 houses, 10 bikes burnt over land dispute

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From **Scholastica Hir Makurdi**

Three people, including a traditional ruler, were reportedly killed following a land dispute between the people of Amla in Otukpo Local Government Area (LGA) and Okete people in Ohimini LGA of Benue State.

Daily Sun gathered that the dispute, which has lingered for about three to four years, heightened at the weekend, claiming the lives of three people from both communities, while property worth millions of naira were destroyed.

It was gathered that between Friday, May 10 and Saturday, May 11, 2024, when the crisis erupted several people have been injured and are currently receiving treatment at the hospital. Also, over 17 houses and 10 motorcycles were reportedly burnt to ashes as a result of the fracas.

Speaking to newsmen on phone in Makurdi, the Caretaker Chairman of Otukpo, Mr Alfred Omakwu, simply said, "the problem was that the Okete people lost it."

He further explained: "They, Okete people, used to farm in Amla land and, sometimes, last year, 2023, when we wanted to do layout to develop the place, the Okete people went to report to the Och'Idoma that their farm products was there and so the Och'Idoma told them no layout would be done until they harvest their products.

"In February this year, they went and harvested their products and the Och'Idoma told them that in March, the Otukpo people can go ahead with their layout. That none of them should farm there again. So, when the bulldozers were brought back to the place, they, again, said they have already farmed on the land and that it is affecting their farm products."

He said the Okete people reported to their second class chief who also confirmed from the Och'Idoma that their people have been told not to farm there again.

"So, when they were doing the layout on Friday, they went to their lawyer, and when he called me, I told him the people were asked not to farm there again, but if they want to go to court, it's their right.

They said they would stop the bulldozers from working and the lawyer told them he would have to get an injunction from the court and they said they can't wait.

"Then, they went to the First Class Chief of Otukpo/Ohimini, who called the Och'Idoma and he still said they should not stop the people doing the layout and he asked them not to farm there again. Then, they went there and opened fire on the people. They killed one, shot two people and burnt all their motorbikes, about 10

of them.

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“So, the Otukpo people retaliated the next day, burnt some houses, killed two people,” Omakwu said.

But, the Caretaker Chairman, Ohimini LGA, Mr Samson Okoh, accused the Otukpo chairman of taking bulldozers to destroy farm crops of his people. Narrating his side of the story, Okoh said the land in dispute is in a place called Amla, close to Okete.

“The Otukpo chairman took bulldozers to the place where the Okete people happened to farm for years, according to him, he wanted to do a layout. So he went and bulldozed their farm crops. When the Okete people approached them and asked why they were doing that, the Amla people said the land does not belong to the Okete people, but to them. So, when the argument ensued, according to what I was told, somehow, one of them from Otukpo pulled the trigger but, mistakenly, the bullet entered the Otukpo person rather.

“Then, on Saturday night, the Amla people reinforced and barricaded the Okete people burnt houses, beat up one boy and, in the day time, around 10 to 11am when I went to take the boy they killed to the mortuary, they, Alma people, went to the place and burnt 17 houses, burnt motorcycles, slaughtered a chief, a clan head, Sunday Okpe, and injured five people. We have taken them to the teaching hospital in Otukpo for treatment.”

Okoh lamented that Okete community is completely deserted as the people have run to take refuge at Ojayi community, pending when peace is restored. He further stated that he was not aware that the Och’Idoma asked his people not to farm there again

“I am not aware of that, but the Otukpo chairman claimed so. I was not told by the Och’Idoma to tell my people not to farm there. The Och’Idoma cannot tell people to stop farming where they have been farming for years without compensation, without settlement and you just take the bulldozer and bulldoze people’s crops.

“Automatically, you’re killing those people and these people have nothing else that they do apart from farming. I am writing to the government to restore peace to enable my people to go home and continue their normal business. If the government can do this, I’ll be very happy,” Okoh said.

Meanwhile, Otukpo chairman, who noted that calm has been restored in his area, said after a peace with the state Commissioner of Police, Hassan Yabanet, in Makurdi, on Monday, they have been asked to fish out those who perpetrated the act, to ensure they are brought to book to serve as a deterrent to others.

“Yesterday the commissioner summoned all of us from both parties for a peace meeting. We have agreed that all the culprits will be brought to book. We will arrest all those who went to start the attack and those who did the reprisal because we asked them not to attack since the people who went to shoot are known, they would be handed over to the police, so that it can serve as a deterrent to other people who would take laws into their hands,” Omakwu said.

When contacted, the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), SP Catherine Anene, confirmed the incident. She said: “I don’t have details, but the incident was confirmed to me and one person died at the time I called.”