

Sorrow, tears, blood

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Wounds shot on the face

An Umobor victim

- Mayhem in Ebonyi, as neighbouring communities fight over farmland

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The land tussle between the people of Umobor community, Akaeze and Ogwor, Ishiagu, both in Ivo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State has taken a more dangerous twist.

The two neighbours have for over five decades laid claim to a fertile land with some lives lost and valuable property destroyed. The tussle shifted to the courts and got to the nation's apex court. The Supreme Court ruled that the land known as Elueke land belongs to Umuobor Akaeze community.



Emmanuel Ajah



CP Uche-Anya

The judgment ought to have laid the land dispute to rest, but it rather escalated the matter, with frequent killings, abductions, shootings, torturing and harassment occurring on the land.

Recently, about six persons were killed over the land tussle while more than ten others were reportedly missing.



Traces of tyre fire injuries

It was the people of Ogor that were first killed in the latest orgy of killings, destructions and abductions. But before this latest incident, some indigenes of Umuobor were allegedly attacked while harvesting their crops on the contentious land. Many persons sustained varying degrees of bullet and machetes injuries. The incident occurred in August this year.

Ogor people then allegedly retaliated last month when assailants from the community invaded the fertile land, killing some farmers of Umubor.

Security agents and chairman of the local government, Emmanuel Ajah had advised the warring communities to stop any activity on the land until further notice but the communities have continued to violate the instructions.

An aged woman from Ogor community and a labourer said to be from Ezza clan in the state who was helping to cultivate the farm was among those killed in the latest attack on the land.

Saddened by the incident, Ogor people retaliated and killed some members of Umubor community in the land. Some sustained grievous injuries.

Twenty-six-year-old Chukwu Chibuike was shot on the face and other parts of his body.

He said: "I went to farm and I was attacked. I went to harvest potatoes on Monday and I was attacked. I was harvesting the potatoes when I saw a group of men coming to me and I was scared because they painted their faces with charcoal and they were wearing clothes I couldn't understand. They told me not

to run, they were armed and I was afraid of them. So, when they were coming very close to where I was, I started running because I couldn't withstand such armed me.

“As I was running, I didn't know that some of them were stationed in different locations, including bushes. Immediately I burst to the road I was trying to follow and escape; I was shot on the face and I fell down. When I fell down, they thought I was dead. One of them said, ‘I didn't miss target, I have killed him.’

“When they came to where they shot me, they didn't see me and they started wondering where I was. By that time, I had run into the bush and they started tracing me with the blood from the bullet injuries I sustained. They started quarrelling with the guy that shot me and boasted he never missed his target, asking him why he deceived them that he killed me when he did not. They told him that they didn't want anybody they shot to escape; that they wanted whoever they shot to be buried so that the body of the person will not be found.

“They started tracing my blood because my blood was dropping as I was escaping. When I noticed that they were tracing my blood, I tore my clothes and tied my face to control the blood. I also tied all other parts of my body that the stray bullets hit and the blood stopped dropping on the ground. I ran very fast and saw them where they were looking for me.

“I got to another community, followed a road that links the community and my own and continued trying to escape. I fell down there because of the severe pains I was having on the head as a result of the bullet wounds. I was lying there when some people saw me and carried me to the hospital. By that time, I was unconscious.

“When I regained consciousness, I discovered that I was in the hospital. That time I was escaping, they were saying ‘let them be going to the government. After government decides, we will decide our own in the bush here because government cannot decide for us.’”

Another victim, Uzoma Chukwu said the warlords accosted him as he was riding to the market on his motorcycle to buy some goods. He said he was ordered to park his bike.

He said that he was tied to a tree like a common criminal by the Ogor warlords. Chukwu said after he was tied up, and they set fire on a tyre and used it on his body which gave him the serious injuries he was still carrying.

He explained that he and another person that was also tied to a tree beside him, were bundled into a vehicle and taken to a police station after their torture.

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“I told them that I was going to the market to buy belts that I sell and they replied that I am a dead person, that my people are killing their own people and I must be killed too.

“They started torturing me and dragged me to a place. I forcefully passed out urine there because of the torture. They moved me from that place to where they tied me to a tree. They waited for sometimes and brought a tyre, put fire on it and started dropping the tyre fire on my head. Some were hitting machetes on me while some were dropping the fire on my head.

“There was also another Akaeze person they tortured and he was also tied to a tree. The guy was returning from Owerri and boarded a truck. They ordered a woman that was in the truck to alight from the truck, they beat her up and told her to go and then took the guy and started torturing him. They opened the guy’s laps with the fire from the tyre and took two of us inside the bush and continued torturing us.

“After torturing us, they called someone to come and carry us to the police station and the person came with a vehicle that was playing loud music. We were pushed into the vehicle and taken to the police station. That person was the general chairman of Ishiagu. We were blindfolded and taken to Ishiagu police station. When they got to the police station, they uncovered our faces and the DPO started quarrelling with them why they treated us that way.”

Chairman of Umuobor community, Nkemakolam Johnson, alleged that Ogor people have been violating the directive from the authorities that restrained both parties to avoid activities on the land.

“Ishiagu people took over our land and we went to court and challenged it up to the Supreme Court and got a judgment against them. Ishiagu people insisted that they can’t leave the land for us. They have been attacking us, killing us and using machetes on us,” he told Saturday Sun.

But his Ogor counterpart, Emmanuel Ajah, said that the disputed land at Elueke belongs to his community.

According to him, it was given to a man from Umuobor by Ogor forefathers in the olden days for farming to enable him feed himself when he was banished for seven years for committing a crime against the Umuobor community.

He noted that when the man returned to Umuobor after the seven years in exile, he came with many food items that he harvested from the land that was given to him by Ogor forebears. The Umuobor people were happy and urged him to take them to the land and he did so, he said.

According to Ajah, the Umuobor people refused to be doing what kept their kinsman on the Elueke land by performing traditional rites as a licence to be farming on the land. This, Ajah noted, angered that man that brought them to the land.

“We have no boundary with Umuobor Akaeze. If you come to our left side from where they are, you get to Okue Autonomous Community also in Ishiagu, we have boundary with Okue there. If you come to our right-hand side, we have boundary with Amagu where former Senate President, Anyim Pius Anyim, hails from and it’s also in Ishiagu. Then in our front, we have boundary with the people of Ugwueke, Abia State.

“This Elueke land that they are contesting with us is the good deeds of our forefathers and it is what is causing this problem. Our forefathers accepted a man from Umuobor who killed a sheep in their community and it was a taboo to kill a sheep in Umuobor in those days. So, our forefathers accepted that man because he was banished from the community for seven years and he ran to them for settlement in Ogor and begged for a land in Elueke where most of these Umuobor people are currently living.

“So, our forefathers accepted the man to live there and be farming for them and be feeding himself. Every year, he renewed his stay on the land by performing traditional rites. After the seven years of banishment, he returned to the community with much food from the Elueke land and his people asked him where he cultivated the food and he told them it was in Ogor, Ishiagu from a land that was given to him by the people. They then told him that they will follow him to the land for cultivation because that land is very fertile and they followed him and started farming on the land.

“They continued farming on the land. The man told them that they should be renewing their activities on the land the way he was doing by performing traditional rites and they refused. The man told them that it

was not good, that if he was not renewing his stay on the land, he would have died of hunger when he was banished from Umuobor. They got angry and incited the man's son when the man had issues with his wife and the son stabbed the man to death. Immediately the man died, they started laying claim to the land and began to attack and kill our people," he narrated. Ajah alleged that Umuobor people have killed nine of their members and destroyed their crops.

"In 1989, they killed seven persons from our place. In 2005, they killed another person, a man known as Sunday, and his body was not seen till today. In 2015, they killed another person from our side, making it nine persons they have killed. As they were killing us, government continued to make peace and we were accepting the peace because we know that the land belongs to our forefathers even though they made a mistake by allowing them to stay on the land.

"Umuobor people intensified efforts to take over the land as they were killing us. They took us to court and you know that at times court's judgement can be faulty, and the court ruled in their favour because they were always appearing in the court each time the matter came up.

"After the court judgment, they left that Elueke land and encroached on our land known as Ovia Ogor and they continued tormenting us. There is a level you will be pushing a person and the person will react, especially when you push him to the wall.

"In May this year, they came and stole all cassava on our farms and harvested our Okra (80 baskets worth N30,000 each). I reported the matter to the police as the village chairman.

"In June this year, they kidnapped five of our people, including one Aja Ude. If not the way our Development Centre Coordinator was calling them on phone and begging them, those five persons would have been dead by now."

Chairman of the council, Emmanuel Ajah, condemned the killings and vowed that the killers would not go unpunished.

He said: "This is a resultant effect of a land dispute between the two communities which has lasted for decades, and my administration has done her best to handle this issue since we came on board.

"A committee I formed has mediated on this issue and came up with a resolution that the said land shall be parcelled this November 2024; a solution adopted by the stakeholders of the two communities, but to my surprise, this evil act came up." The council boss stated that he visited the area alongside security

agents during which he condoled with the victims' families so as to foster a peaceful atmosphere in the communities involved.

“During my visit, I urged the Ogor community not to seek revenge for the killings but to trust in my ability to address these security challenges,” he said.

The state Police Public Relations Officer, DSP Joshua Ukandu said tactical teams of the state police command, were deployed to the communities to prevent further breakdown of law and order.

Ukandu said: “Yes, two persons were killed. The Police have deployed tactical teams to the area and restored normalcy. Investigation has commenced into the matter.”