

COVER STORY

**Chris Uba,
controversial
political
godfather,
allegedly
backs Onitsha
crisis to pave
the way for
his brother's
governorship
ambition**



*Obi: Imposes a
dusk-to-dawn
curfew*

*Uba: Accused of
sponsoring the
mayhem*

A Bloody Plot



Policemen on the alert: Their armoured
tank and truck lost to the crisis

By UBA AHAM

Okwara Kalu Uche, comptroller-general of prisons, literally wept at the premises of Onitsha prison last Tuesday. The comptroller-general who was on a fact-finding tour of the prison which was, the previous day, torched by hoodlums in the commercial city could not contain his emotions. He fought hard to fight back tears at the sight of the wreck to which the vandals had turned the federal government institution. "See what human beings have done to our prison! See the wreck to which vandals have turned our federal institution," the comptroller-general lamented. Those "human beings" set some buildings in the premises ablaze. Vital documents containing records of the inmates were, in the process, destroyed. After the mobile policemen and prison officials had scampered to safety, the hoodlums, subsequently, embarked on what seemed to be their primary target in the operation: the release of 204 inmates of the prison, including convicts and those on Awaiting Trial Moment, ATM. A similar violent operation in February this year also witnessed the release of over 700 inmates from the same prison. Uche fingered the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, as the brain behind the violence.

The burning of Onitsha prison and the attendant release of its inmates was, however, preceded by a rolling crisis that had engulfed the commercial town since Wednesday, June 14. The violence was reported to have been sparked off by the brutal murder of a young trader, Ikechukwu Ede. Ede, a 32-year-old textile trader at the Bridgehead Market, had just returned to his Okpoko Layout residence in the city at the end of the day's business on the fateful day when he heard a knock on his door.

**MASSOB laments
the killing of their
members**

Perhaps, thinking that the visitor was one of his friends, Ede (fondly called IK) opened his door, beaming with smiles. He was wrong, for, staring him in the face were five gunmen who immediately descended on him. One of the assailants gripped the dazed Ede by the neck while another, at close range, shot point-blank into his right eye. The bullet pierced through Ede's eye and ripped open his skull at the back. He died instantly, but his assailants were not done. They dealt their victim several machete blows and eventually set his remains ablaze in front of his residence.

This murder too many, it was believed, set the tone for the violence and bloodbath that had, in the past week, wracked the commercial city of Onitsha. Members of MASSOB in the city identified Ede as one of their members and accused the rival union, National Association of Road Transport Workers, NARTO, of killing him. But, while the controversies surrounding the murder raged, another armed gang, the following day, opened fire on a group of people holding a meeting on the outskirts of

the town, killing two of them. MASSOB also claimed that the two persons killed were their members, blaming the attack on a combined team of policemen and NARTO members. Those killed so far, according to the organisation, include Kelechi Enyinwa, Iroabuchi Odife, Arinze Ogozie,

Richard Ukoh, Chiemele Onuigbo, Emmanuel Udokwu, Onyeka Asoanya, Azubuike Godson and Ikechukwu Iwu, among others. The organisation subsequently, the following day, Friday, June 16, embarked on a demonstration against the killings. They were marching from Onitsha town to Awka, the capital, to protest the killing of their members to Governor Peter Obi when they had a bloody clash with the police who moved to halt the demonstration. Two persons died in the clash. It was indeed at this point that Onitsha drifted from a commercial to a warring city.

That was the immediate cause of the crisis that engulfed Onitsha in the past week. The conflict was actually a catalyst for a dormant

for Power

Cover Story



Uche: Laments the destruction of Onitsha prison

volcano. This is because it is believed to be a preparation for the 2007 election. It is all a struggle over the control of the instruments of violence and coercion for the election. The crisis is actually a throwback, a re-enactment of a similar crisis that occurred in 2002 as a prelude to the 2003 election. At that time, there was the *Bakasst Boys* who were created by the state assembly, ostensibly to augment the work of the police in providing security. But they were being used by the then governor, Chinwoke Mbadinuju, as an 'army' to muzzle the opposition. He successfully used the outfit against his first godfather, Emeka Ofor. When the latter abandoned politics, however, Chris Uba stepped into his shoes.

And as the 2003 elections approached, Uba had made up his mind that Mbadinuju would not return to Government House because he was getting increasingly unpopular. Civil servants and teachers were being owed salaries, and schools were closed for a long time. Uba turned to NARTO, which was then engaged in a fierce battle with the NURTW over control of parks in the state. Uba backed NARTO because of his agenda to use it in the 2003 election and caused the House of Assembly to enact a law recognising it. When the time to fight the governor came, he allegedly used his federal links to outlaw the *Bakasst Boys*. And the coast was thus clear for him to use NARTO to bring Ngige into office.

Now, to the current crisis. Uba wants to monopolise the terror machine in the state and he knows that MASSOB poses a threat to his supremacy. That much has been obvious to him after an incident at the Ochanja Relief Market during the election of the leadership of the traders' association. An associate of Uba who ran for election got Uba's backing. His

opponents, knowing that Uba would take over the association, moved against this by inviting MASSOB. Three people were killed and many others injured when NARTO and MASSOB clashed. But Uba used the police to crush and flush out MASSOB. Though he won that battle, Uba realised that MASSOB poses a threat to his control of the instruments of violence because he would not be able to use NARTO effectively during the election. But MASSOB sees NARTO as an agent of the establishment which it is fighting, so they always confront each other. This is the reason for the fighting between NARTO and MASSOB. Ngige understood what NARTO stood for and banned it but with Uba's sponsorship, it continues to exist and work with the police.

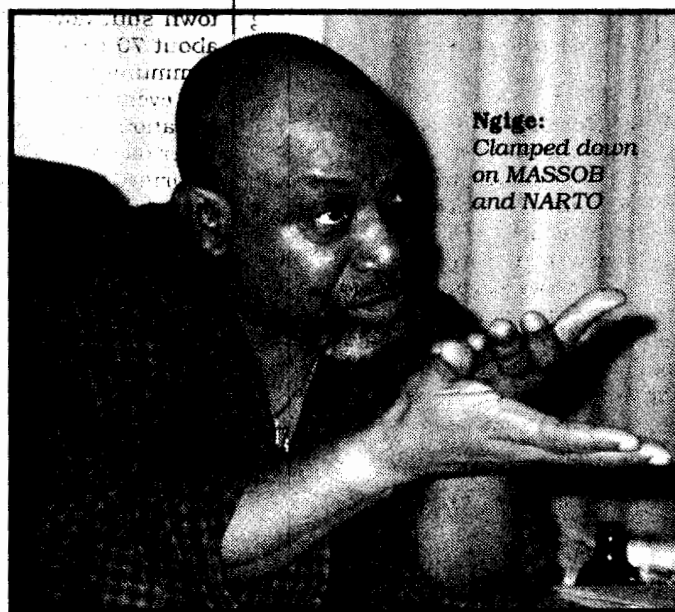
Part of the problem also has to do with the arrest and continuing detention of one Egbuka, the man who helped organise

Uba's terror machine in 2003. Egbuka crossed to the Ngige side during the crisis between the former governor and Uba, and has since defected to Advanced Congress of Democrats. To neutralise him, Uba allegedly caused him to be accused of being a financier of MASSOB. He was arrested over six weeks ago and is being detained in Abuja. Last week, the man told his associates from his detention cell that pressure was being mounted on him to capitulate and come back to the Uba camp so that he could re-enact the thuggery and violence that saw Ngige, Uba's candidate, winning the election. But Egbuka is afraid that they will

use and dump him again. That suspicion further fuelled the raging fire in Onitsha.

In the ongoing mayhem, both the police and civilian residents in the town have continued to count their losses. At the last count last week, four police stations in the town, including the popular Kirikiri Police Station, located at the popular 33 Section of the town, Marine Police Post near River Niger and another police station on Owerri Road, had been razed by hoodlums. They also burnt another police station in Ozoubulu, Ekwusigbo Council area of the state, and freed inmates of the cells in some of the torched police stations. The police did not lose only their stations. Apart from their numerous men who sustained varying degrees of injuries, the force also lost vehicles, including an armoured personnel carrier estimated at N70 million, and a Tata truck.

An upset Governor Obi had, in league with President Olusegun Obasanjo, deployed the military to the boiling commercial city to quell this orgy of violence and destruction. The occupation of the town by soldiers was followed up on Sunday, June 18, with the announcement of a curfew by the governor. "This curfew will run from Sunday, June 18, 2006 to Saturday, June 24, 2006, beginning each day at 7pm and ending the



Ngige: Clamped down on MASSOB and NARTO