

Onitsha, Bound to Violence



The commercial capital of Anambra State has again and again erupted in violence, which often leads to death and destruction

By UBA AHAM and OLUKOREDE YISHAU

In its full swing, Onitsha, the commercial capital of Anambra State, is a beehive of activities. With luxury buses arriving from and leaving for almost every part of the country, and the brisk businesses going on there, it is an interesting sight to behold. But that is when things have not fallen apart. The truth, however, is that they do fall apart often, leaving sorrow, tears and blood in its wake. It is a costly luxury for policemen to be lax because police stations are major targets of the vandals; and government and private properties get burnt down from time to time. In those moments of madness, which could be a protest by members of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, or a reprisal attack over violence on the Igbo in the North, or a fight by rival transport

unions, human lives mean nothing. And the police seems unable to change this status quo.

In March this year, the city went up in flames three good times. One was during the national headcount. The whole brouhaha happened when members of MASSOB tried to prevent enumerators from counting people on the pretext that Anambra State, where Onitsha is located, and the whole of the South-east, were not part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Dangerous weapons such as AK47 rifles and explosives were said to have been used. Twenty-seven members of MASSOB were arrested.

Earlier that month, people believed to be members of MASSOB had seized a police post in the city, taken two policemen hostage and reportedly killed no fewer than eight persons. Petrol bombs were said to have been freely used. Another orgy of violence shortly after this led to the burning of a part of the Onitsha house of the late Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president. MASSOB was blamed for this destruction. But the group said had nothing to do with it. Desmond Ojukwu, a chieftain of the group, said the arson was state-sponsored. "We are not known for violence. We have not, in our long history, done anything the contrary," argued Ojukwu.

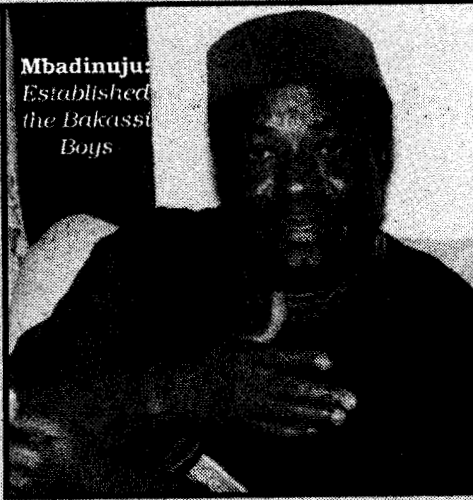
Really, not every violent eruption of Onitsha has the seal of MASSOB. As a result of the riots in the northern parts of the country over the Danish cartoons in February this year, which was seen as a mockery of Prophet Muhammad, Onitsha was the hub of the reprisal attacks. As corpses were brought past the Niger Bridge gateway to Onitsha, irate mobs allegedly turned

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the heat on northerners in the city. It left no fewer than 100 people dead and many injured. Cars and other properties like mosques were either burnt or vandalised. The orgy of violence led to the deployment of soldiers to the city. Significantly, Onitsha was also not left out of the violence that enveloped Anambra State over attempts by Chris Uba to remove Chris Ngige as governor of Anambra State. It was usually the take-off point. On November 9, last year, some people suspected to be acting Uba's script burnt down the Anambra Broadcasting Service, ABS, Onitsha. The workers on duty at the time were hounded out of their offices and dynamites were planted at different locations. More than 1,000 youths later laid siege on the popular Onitsha Bridge, preventing vehicles from either coming in or going out. Soldiers were later deployed to the bridge head. Reports had it that no fewer than 27 persons died even though the police said no case was reported to it.

But how did a city of commerce arrive at this impasse? The problem began shortly after the Nigeria Civil War, which was between 1966 and 1970. The 30-month conflict between the then Nigerian government and the seceding Easterners, led by Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, left in its trail numerous casualties who either lost their breadwinners in the war or their jobs. This situation, subsequently, led to

Mbadinuju:
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Boys

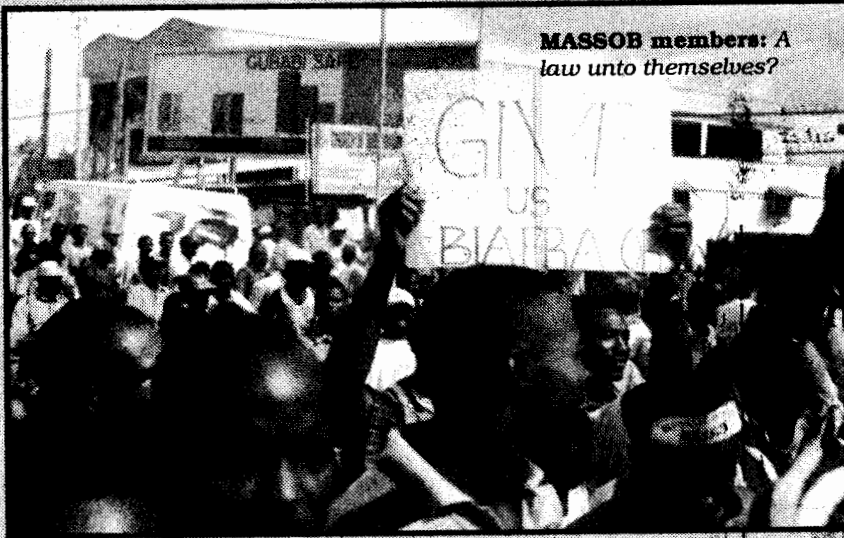


international concern. The city became a no-go area, as visitors were robbed, dehumanised and, in most cases, killed. Governor Mbadinuju, subsequently, established the dreaded Anambra State Vigilante Service, AVS, otherwise known as *Bakassi Boys*. The *Bakassi Boys* slaughtered perceived criminals in Onitsha and beyond with reckless abandon. By the time Mbadinuju's *Bakassi Boys* outfit was disbanded by the federal government, tens of thousands of suspected hoodlums had been extrajudicially murdered. The introduction of *The Bakassi Boys*, just like in the case of *Boys Oye*, only served as a temporary relief to visitors and residents of the town. The menace returned as soon as *Bakassi Boys* was disbanded. Mbadinuju's successor, Chris Ngige, tried to contain the Onitsha violence upsurge in the city by establishing his own brand of *Bakassi Boys*. His efforts never really yielded the desired result.

Unknown to the people of the state, these security arrangements by the respective governors of the state, rather than curb crime, had ended up aggravating it. This is because each governor, when vacating office, leaves behind operatives of his own security outfit. Most times, these operatives, with the connivance of their sponsors, constitute a nuisance to lives and property of residents as they terrorise and, at times, kill to remain relevant in the scheme of things in the state. And it is noteworthy that, although Awka is the capital town, Onitsha remains the hub of all activities in the state. This was why the hoodlums who plundered the state in November last year, looting and burning down government property and buildings, were reported to have been recruited from Onitsha. At the moment, over 10 heavily armed gangs operate in the commercial city alone, including *Bakassi Boys*, National Association of Road Transport Workers, NARTO, Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, National Union of Road Transport Workers, NURTW, and Onitsha Market Amalgamated Traders Association, OMATA, among others. Most of these groups, it was reliably gathered, have their camps in forests on the outskirts of the city. Such outskirts are said to be located at Mkpikpa Layout and Abakpa forest. For instance, the hoodlums who vandalised and set Onitsha prison on fire last week were said to have trooped out from Abakpa forest.

It is the proliferation of these armed security groups with divergent objectives that has culminated in the incessant bloody clashes in the town. And the end to the ongoing carnage appears not in sight despite the efforts of both the police and Anambra State government.

MASSOB members: A
law unto themselves?



high influx of people mainly to urban areas located in Igbo land. It was after some time that major migration by *Ndigo* to other cities in Nigeria began because of the post-war tension and mutual suspicion. As a result, the post-war era witnessed urban congestion in major cities of the South-east with Onitsha ranking highest. The influx, before long, led to a crime wave that snowballed over time.

At this point in time, armed robbers, popularly called *Abali di egwu* (danger lurks in the night) in local parlance, overran the city of Onitsha, robbing, maiming and killing innocent residents. Criminal activities, indeed, reached such an unbearable proportion that agitated residents of the commercial city, some time in 1970, trooped out of their residences, fishing out and meting out jungle justice to suspected robbers and hoodlums terrorising the town. That historic operation was tagged

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next day at 6am," he said. Obi, who had been shuttling between the state and Abuja to hold consultations with the President over the crisis, announced the curfew in a special broadcast to the state. Two days later, reacting to intelligence reports, the governor equally clamped curfew on six other towns. The towns are Oba, Obosi, Nkpor, Nsugbe, Ogbaru and Okpoko.

Apart from the curfew, Obi wielded the big stick on the warring organisations believed to be causing the crisis in the town by proscribing them. They include MASSOB, NARTO, *Bakassi Boys*, Anambra State Vigilante Service, AVS, and the National Union of Road Transport Workers, NURTW. The governor said that miscreants had continued to hide under these groups to cause anarchy in the city. But it is not certain whether the governor's proscription of the warring groups would quell the incessant unrest in the city. An earlier similar proscription of NARTO by the state House of Assembly was of no effect as the organisation has continued to carry out its activities in the state without let or hindrance.

Already, MASSOB has challenged its proscription by Governor Obi. The organisation even demands apologies from Obi for pronouncing its ban. In a press statement entitled "Governor Obi Should Leave MASSOB Alone and Face His Business", signed by David Mac-David, its Eastern Region deputy director, the organisation denied its involvement in the mayhem in Onitsha, blaming the crisis on NARTO. But NARTO chairman in the state, Ben Nwankwo, countered, insisting that members of his organisation had no hand in the crisis.

Perhaps, the worst hit in the incessant carnage in the commercial city are traders and business activities both within and outside the state. Onitsha is largely seen as the next largest commercial town in Nigeria after Lagos. On a good business day, according to the Central Bank of Nigeria, CBN, statistics, the city generates an average daily business volume of N1.2



Okiro and Ajakaiye: Temporarily relocate to the troubled spot

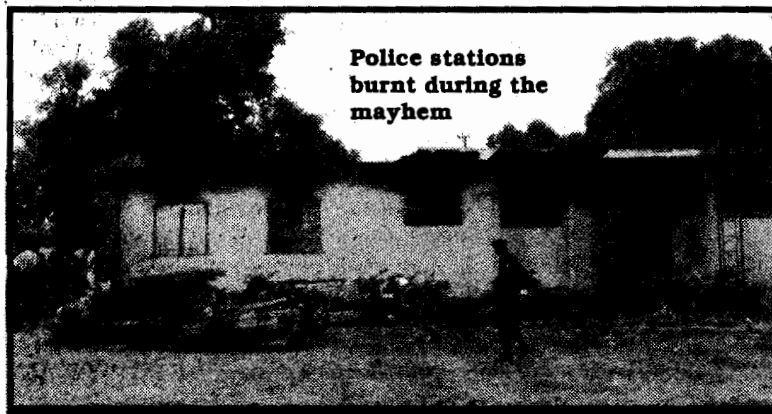
billion. Sylvester Odife, President of Anambra State Amalgamated Traders Association, ASMATA, lamented, in an interview with TELL in Onitsha: "In a crisis period like this, Onitsha commercial town loses about N1.2 billion daily".

Odife explained that people who travel from far and near to do business in the town withdraw because of fear of insecurity. This fear is, of course, justified following latest incidents in the city. The ASMATA president stated that some visiting traders were, incidentally, being robbed in the city. He cited a heart-rending instance at the Upper Iweka area where a female trader on a business trip to the town was both robbed and gang-raped. Yet, there was another robbery operation amidst the commotion last Tuesday along Awka Road in the city. Curiously, this particular robbery operation took place in the full glare of the joint team of soldiers and police

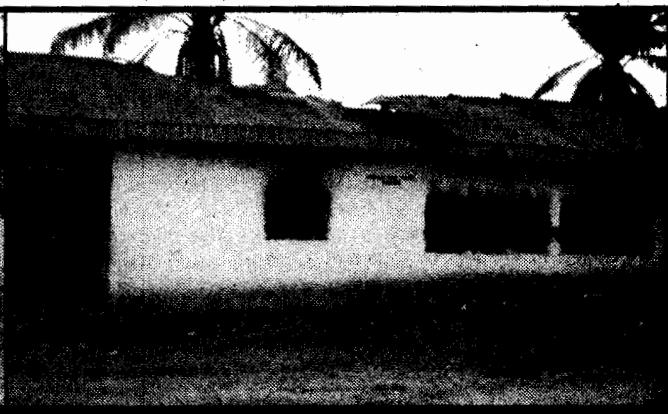
patrolling the town.

Odife is a textile dealer, and on a good day, he can sell materials worth about N70,000. But that volume of business, in the face of current disorder in the city, is a tall dream, and Odife is not alone. Ijeoma Ekwusike, a *garri* seller at the ever-busy Bridgehead Market, told the magazine that Onitsha's endless turmoil has continued to adversely affect foodstuff dealers like her. "Do you know that any time there is this kind of problem in this town, I don't make up to N2,000 because customers will desert the market, preferring to patronise neighbouring dealers. If things are normal, I could make sales of N7,000 and above from *garri* alone", Ekwusike, who also deals in other foodstuffs such as beans and rice, stated.

The mayhem has similarly left in its trail corporate victims in the city and beyond, especially banking institutions. The commercial town plays host to about 70 commercial banks, excluding numerous community banks that dot the



**Police stations
burnt during the
mayhem**



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markets in the area. The banks are known to incur mega losses during the recurring crisis in the town. In the current crisis, in fact, almost all the banks had to shut down for fear of unpleasant experiences in the hands of the rampaging hoodlums in the commercial town. The losses incurred by banks, TELL learnt, run into billions of naira.

Last week, fears were raised as the situation seemingly assumed a more disturbing dimension. Some hoodlums stormed some markets and streets, disarming privately engaged security personnel. They dispossessed them of their pump action guns. What this trend would result to in the weeks ahead is yet unknown, but the traders are sure that it portends more disaster for the town. A few residents also contemplated a temporary relocation to presumed safer neighbouring communities. This decision to relocate was before the governor extended the dusk-to-dawn curfew to these neighbours of Onitsha. The extension of the curfew to the communities was informed by fears that the Onitsha crisis might soon spread to them. To drive home the message that he would deal ruthlessly with hoodlums, Obi had met with all the stakeholders in the commercial city. And he has read the riot act to them.

To underscore the security implication of the Onitsha crisis to the entire nation, the army and police high command also met last week in Enugu to seek ways of restoring peace to the war-torn city. The Enugu security meeting was attended by Mike Okiro, deputy inspector-general of police, and the general officer commanding, GOC, 82 Division of the Nigerian Army who was represented by John Ochoga, a colonel. The GOC expressed the concern of the military over the turmoil in Onitsha, claiming that military intervention in the crisis had already started yielding positive results.

But not a few believe that the crisis is far from abating, as the whole city remained largely grounded throughout last week, with palpable tension in the air. The joint security meeting, however, appreciated that the Onitsha crisis was taking a toll on general commercial activities and well-being of the nation. And to ensure that the crisis does not spread to other parts of the South-east, at the

end of the Enugu meeting, the police also reiterated the proscription of MASSOB and allied groups throughout the zone. Okiro had earlier vowed that the police would do everything humanly possible not only to hunt down the fleeing prison inmates, but equally quell the mayhem in Onitsha. Both Okiro and his subordinate, Adewole Ajakaiye, assistant inspector-general of police, have, since the fresh outbreak of violence in the town, relocated their base to the city.

As Obi shuttled between his state and Abuja last week, there were rumours that the President might declare a state of emergency in Anambra. But ASMATA not only debunked the rumours, it equally declared that some powerful people in the state, who do not want Obi's government to succeed, were the ones fuelling the crisis. According to Odife, the target of these people is to portray the state as ungovernable and that the governor as incapable of handling the situation. All



Obasanjo:
Sends
military to
restore
order

this, he said, is to enable the sponsors achieve a future political objective. Obi's government is more pointed in its allegation that the intractable crisis in Onitsha is politically motivated. Mike Udah, chief press secretary to Governor Obi, asserted that the main sponsor of the mayhem is Uba, the godfather of Anambra State politics. According to Udah, Uba's motive is to instigate enough crisis, using the rising number of violent groups in the city, to ensure that peace eludes the state until 2007 when he (Uba) plans to install his brother, Andy, as governor of the state. Andy is currently a presidential aide. Uba is also said to be uncomfortable with the current chummy relationship between Governor Obi and President Obasanjo. The

healthy relationship is already yielding positive dividends to the state as opposed to the fractious era of Obi's predecessor, Chris Ngige. Recently, Obasanjo, Udah disclosed, approved a reimbursement of N4 billion to Obi's government, being funds expended by former Governor Ngige to repair federal roads in the state.

But why has the crisis refused to abate despite massive police presence in the city? Both the traders and the state government accuse the police in the state of complicity with Uba in unsettling the state. Udah alleged that Uba's long-run objective is the imposition of a state of emergency, which may give political leverage to his party, the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, in the state. Sadly, the mayhem in Onitsha has persisted in spite of Governor Obi's recent motivation of the police in the state. The governor had recently donated facilities to the state police command, including 10 mini buses, 40 walkie-talkies and two UHF repeater stations. He also made a cash donation of N2.5 million to the force, among other items of logistics. Yet these gestures of the governor have not improved the security situation in the commercial town. Udah, who hailed the deployment of military troops to the city to quell the raging crisis, however, alerted that, if not checked on time, the situation could lead to a repeat of November 10, 2003 mayhem in the state in which buildings and properties belonging to the state government were burnt down and looted by miscreants.

Udah observed that the burning of a police station in Ozoubulu, a town far away from Onitsha, is a dangerous signal that the crisis could escalate to other parts of the state if the situation is not halted with dispatch. Could the Onitsha crisis actually be said to have defied solution? The answer, of course, rests on how both the army and police high command charged with restoration of peace to the ever-troubled commercial hub of the East handle the hoodlums. For instance, there are conflicting reports on the number of gangsters that set the prison in the town ablaze. While some say the mob numbered over 5,000, preliminary investigations by the comptroller-general indicate that only a gang of nine stormed the prison. And there were reportedly 16 mobile policemen and four prison officials on duty, all of them heavily armed. So, what happened? Perhaps, the riddle will be solved after the panel set up by the comptroller-general submits its findings. What the authorities do with such findings will go a long way in determining the end of the Onitsha internecine wars.

**Additional report by
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