

Onitsha Still Boils

The eruption of fresh violence in Onitsha may eventually lead to a state of emergency unless the law enforcement agencies get tougher on the warring groups

By UBA AHAM

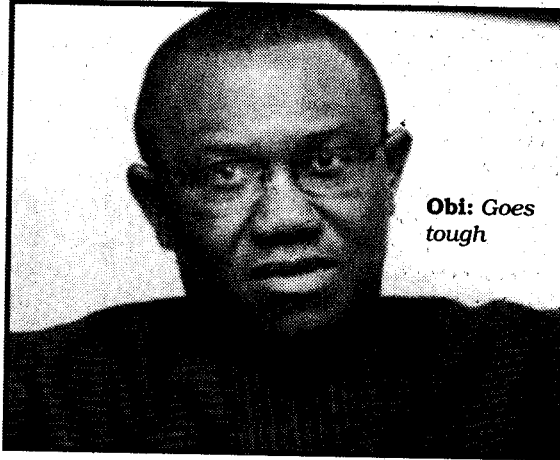
Last Wednesday was another tension-soaked and bloody day in the commercial town of Onitsha. In one fell swoop, no fewer than seven persons suspected to be members of the National Association of Road Transport Owners, NARTO, recently outlawed in Anambra State, were felled by police bullets. NARTO, a militant organisation sponsored by a self-acclaimed godfather of Anambra State politics, is reportedly set to plunge the state into another level of violence of which its outcome may be a declaration of a state of emergency in the state.

Last week's fracas was sparked off by tension generated by Governor Peter Obi's ultimatum to rival organisations to vacate markets, motor parks and other public places in the state on or before Monday, July 3 or face the wrath of his government. The affected groups include NARTO, Nigerian Union of Road Transport Workers, NURTW, Bakassi Boys and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB.

Trouble, the magazine learnt, started when suspected members of NARTO in the Obosi area, near Onitsha, attacked a policeman on escort duty to the Ugwuagba market. The hoodlums, mistaking the cop for a riot policeman on a mission to enforce the ban on rival associations, attacked him with sticks, cudgels and other dangerous weapons. But, unknown to the hoodlums, the ill-fated officer had accompanied a trader to purchase some goods at the market.

It was in a seeming reprisal attack by the policeman's 'comrades in arms' that seven of the hoodlums were reportedly gunned down. It was learnt that on getting the report of the assault on the officer, a reinforcement of the combined team of military and policemen deployed to the troubled city to restore normalcy stormed the market and a shoot-out ensued between them and the armed hoodlums.

Insisting that NARTO members were



Obi: Goes tough

the policeman's attackers, MASSOB accused the combined team of military and police officers in the town of hunting down its members.

Moses Igwe, MASSOB public relations officer in Onitsha, in an interview with TELL, alleged that the team, last week, burnt down 10 buildings suspected to be inhabited by MASSOB members in the town. He claimed that seven of the buildings were located in Okpoko area of the town while three were in Oraukwu Street, Fegge.

"These police/military teams are busy



Ehindero: Deploys more personnel to the embattled state

killing us, burning down buildings where we live. They also rob innocent residents of the town as well as rape young girls. By the time we confront them, Nigeria will quake," Igwe threatened.

MASSOB is, however, not alone in the allegation of robbery against the military/police patrol team operating in Onitsha. A traveller, Mohammed Usman, phoned the magazine to complain that he and 10 other commuters were, last Thursday, robbed by some uniformed men in the town. Usman narrated that the men, after robbing them at gunpoint, drove them to a police station in a remote part of the town. According to him, the uniformed robbers thoroughly searched their bags and took away their handsets and other personal effects before pushing them out of the station into the dark night.

Fidelis Agbo, public relations officer, Anambra State Police Command, could not, as at press time, confirm or deny the killing of the seven traders and the robbery incidents involving uniformed men. Agbo stated that the command was yet to receive a signal concerning the incidents.

With the bloody clash and the allegations of brigandage, traders in the state may be on a collision course with the joint police and military patrol team. The Anambra State Markets Amalgamated Traders Association, ASMATA, condemned the incident and called on the authorities to call the operatives to order to avert further escalation of the crisis in the town. Vin Obi, ASMATA vice chairman, stated that the association was disturbed over the assault on the police officer and the alleged attendant killing of the traders.

Tension, however, has continued to run high in the commercial city following President Olusegun Obasanjo's recent order to the police high command to, in line with Governor Obi's ultimatum, flush out the rival organisations and immediately take over motor parks in the state until peace is restored. Sunday Ehindero, the inspector-general of police, the magazine learnt, has already deployed a team of policemen to take over the parks and relevant public places in the state.

However, the effect of this move to strictly enforce Obi's ban is expected to manifest in the weeks ahead as the rival groups are said to be mobilising their members to resist the ban. Some of the organisations, TELL learnt, have sworn to stay put in the markets and parks, threatening to confront government's enforcing agents, and unleash more havoc in the state, especially Onitsha. This threat, as it were, is informed by the fact that the respective organisations generate their revenues from the markets and parks in which many of their members operate. ■