



Savage Revenge

Afiesere: Now a ghost of its former self

Police and members of Afiesere in Ughelli North Local Government area of Delta State trade accusations over who were responsible for the cruel attack on the community

By ADEKUNBI ERO

Since September 14, when scores of irate mobile policemen allegedly sacked Afiesere in Ughelli North Local Government area of Delta State, life has not been the same again for the people of the town. And it may never be for a very long time. The usual boisterous community is now a ghost of its former self — desolate and lifeless.

When TELL visited the embattled community two weeks ago, there were a

few young men, very aged persons, women and children around. Some young men were seated in an abandoned shop which served as their place of refuge since their homes had been sacked. Since the incident, most of those who fled the town were yet to return. Schools were closed and social life was at its lowest ebb.

TELL learnt that trouble started for the community when Nnamdi Ngwokor, a superintendent of police and the Divisional Police Officer, DPO, in charge of "B" Division, Agbara-Otor, Ughelli, as well as Allison Elias, a police inspector, were murdered in cold blood by some militant youths believed to be from Afiesere community. Shortly after that, there was a rampage in the town. More than 70 houses, shops and several cars were razed during the mayhem. Prominent among properties burnt was the Afiesere Civic Centre, which also doubled as a hotel, donated by the Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC, in

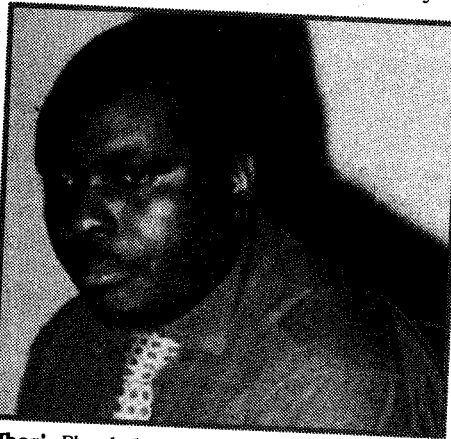
December 2004 to the community. The community's bus was also set ablaze while a new modern hotel belonging to the vice chairman of Ughelli-North Local Government council, which was to be commissioned the following Sunday, September 17, was torched.

Since the incident, community members and police have been trading blames on who were responsible for the carnage in the city. Udom Ekpoudom, the state police commissioner, insisted his men were not the culprits. "After the killing of the DPO and inspector, Afiesere divided into two. Some were really against the killing of these policemen and some were for. Because they were divided, they started burning their houses... The houses torched were all shanties," Ekpoudom argued.

Festus Keyamo, a lawyer to the community, however, told TELL in a telephone interview that the police were responsible for the wanton destruction of Afiesere. "What the commissioner is doing is what is called complete daylight deceit and lies," Keyamo said. The counsel insisted that there was no conflict between the villagers and, as such, there would have been no need to kill themselves and destroy their own properties. "Information reaching us is

that he was aware; in fact, he sent his combat policemen to the community," he said.

Some members of the community who spoke to the magazine corroborated Keyamo's allegation. Ikpoko Olochoja, an elderly man whose son, Vincent, was arrested by the police, claimed that the policemen came, shooting sporadically at



Ibori: Pleaded with the police not to retaliate

about 10 pm. "People dey run, although, myself, I no run. I no sabi to run. If I die make I die for my house. I don old, I no fit run. But my pickin, the youth leader, he run. But don catch am. So, he dey for Asaba, for police station," Olochoja said.

Joshua Umukoro, 32, student of Nigerian Institute of Purchasing and Supplies, Lagos who was home on holidays, gave an insight into what led to the community's travails. According to Umukoro, the problem was caused by one Oke, a former Bakassi leader who now serves as the youth leader of Ekiugbo. He claimed that Oke was very troublesome and that a lot of people feared him in the state. Oke was said to have fallen out with one of his lieutenants whose mother is from Afiesere. When they fell out, Oke reportedly promised to eliminate his erring lieutenant resident in Ekiugbo. The said lieutenant was said to have been wounded and hospitalised following an encounter with Oke. He later bolted from the hospital when he learnt that Oke was still on his trail. When the matter seemed to be getting out of hand, the mother of the lieutenant went to Afiesere to report to the youths at motor parks that Oke wanted to kill their brother. "On the basis of that, the boys mobilised, saying that they must put an end to Oke's act of terrorism. They even told the police that they were going to look for Oke because he was on the police's wanted list. So, if they are able to bring Oke to the police, they will be happy," a source said.

During the crisis, the youths seized some vehicles, including that of Oceanic

The Police Were Responsible

Festus Keyamo, a lawyer based in Lagos, speaks on the next line of action after the Afiesere invasion by the police

By ADEKUNBI ERO



Keyamo: There was no conflict among the villagers

We understand you have been briefed by the Afiesere community on the mayhem allegedly unleashed on the people by the police. What exactly are you up to?

The issue is this. We have taken steps to initiate an action at the Federal High Court, Benin, one, for the enforcement of rights of those who have been declared wanted unnecessarily, and secondly, on behalf of those who have lost their lives or property. We have also taken steps to inform the relevant authorities. We are drafting a letter to the President and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. We are also writing letters to the Senate Committee on Human Rights, the House of Representatives Committee on Human Rights and the director of State Security Service because we feel the police is an accomplice in this dastardly genocide and, so, lacks the competence to carry out the investigation. We are also informing the Inspector-general of police. We are calling for the removal of the commissioner of police, Delta State, and the area commander of Ughelli.

I spoke with the police commissioner and he insisted that his men were not responsible for the mayhem visited on the community.

There are eyewitnesses' accounts to that effect; people have spoken. You have gone to the village yourself. You have seen witnesses on television. There was no conflict among the villagers; there was no conflict between that village and another village. What the commissioner is doing is what is called complete daylight deceit and lies.

The commissioner alleged that the vice chairman of the council is the mastermind of the crisis between the police and the community. He said meeting was held in his hotel in Afiesere

So, the vice-chairman presided over a meeting to burn down his own hotel where he put in 10 years of his hard-earned money and sweat. That is the most stupid reason I've ever heard since I was born.

So, what do you have to say to the killing of the two police officers - the DPO and inspector?

We condemn it. But it is absolutely no reason for what happened. It was just as it happened in Odi when soldiers were killed; just like it happened in Tivland when soldiers were killed - there's absolutely no reason for the revenge that took place. In any case, the people who killed the two policemen that died were also shot dead. The boys died on the spot. I hope you are aware of that.

Bank. Hence, they were reported to the police as armed robbers. Before the police came, the rampaging youths went to Ekiugbo and when they did not find Oke, they returned, abandoning the seized vehicles. As they were dispersing, the police came. Sources said it was at that point the DPO ran into them. Ngwikor allegedly brought out his gun and one of the youths wanted to grab it, shouting "This is what we are looking for." The DPO reportedly fired, killing three of the youths. The youths got angry and killed Ngwikor and the inspector. Consequently, the area commander sent a message to the commissioner for reinforcement. Thereafter, mayhem was unleashed on the community.

The magazine learnt that as soon as the two police officers were killed, Governor James Ibori, who was on vacation, was immediately alerted and he got in touch with the commissioner, pleading with him not to retaliate. The commissioner also confirmed this to the magazine. But that entreaty seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.

Umukoro claimed that between 9 and 10 pm when the police came on a revenge mission, nobody was in the community because, after the earlier invasion that same evening, everybody had run into the bush. "They had a field day looting and burning because the people had

abandoned their homes," Umukoro said.

One of those affected was Josiah Umukoro, a teacher at Government House College, Ughelli, whose cosy bungalow was razed and all his properties either looted or vandalised. Umukoro said the burnt house was built from proceeds of several years of hard work. "The day in question, I was in school till about 11 am when a relation called to inform me that there was problem in the village between some irate youths at Upper Afiesere Road and the Nigeria Police. As a result, two police officers had been killed, including three of the irate youths," he said. The school teacher claimed that he immediately went to carry his visiting aged mother to safety. Thereafter, he picked a few things from his house and fled the town. "I learnt that the police had entered this community. We saw them. The Hillux vehicles were about nine, loaded with men of the Nigeria Police. They started burning houses in this area. My house happened to be one of those burnt down and, when I came the following day, I found that all the houses on that line were razed", he said. He added: "It is true that it is the police that did the havoc. There were no irate youths here again because when the police came, all of them fled. The police

took advantage of that to break in, looting and burning down houses". Umukoro said a number of people were also killed during the raid. "We discovered recently that many corpses were floating in the swamps. Those who, out of panic, ran into the deep lake have perished," he said.

Julius Akpovoka, vice chairman of the Ughelli North Local Government, whom the state commissioner of police accused of being the mastermind of the crisis, told the magazine that he knew nothing about the ugly incident. Akpovoka, who has since relocated to Benin, Edo State, claimed that he was being roped in because he had been vocal against the police for perpetrating the arson and stealing. "I feel pained because my father's house was burnt, my younger brother's house was burnt and my new hotel I intended to open, Sunday, September 17, was also burnt down. Besides, I am also from that community," he said.

In spite of the assurances by Benjamin Elue, deputy governor of Delta State, on his visit, the community was still deserted when TELL visited two weeks ago. The burnt houses stood as a sad reminder of the holocaust that befell the community.

On his visit to the community, Broderick Bozimo, the minister for police affairs, described the incident as sad and regrettable.

Afiesere People Are to Blame

Udom Ekpoudom, commissioner of police, Delta State, exonerates his men from the devastation at Afiesere

By ADEKUNBI ERO

The allegation by the people is that your men - the police - perpetrated that act of massive destruction in the town. What is your reaction?

My area commander was in trouble and as the commander of the police command, he asked me to send reinforcement. First of all, he called me to say "Oga, some people from Afiesere are trying to cause trouble; they are robbing people in the town". He said he had sent his men to go there and relay to him what really happened. The men, according to him, came back and said that people from Afiesere were planning to move to Ekiugbo for revenge because one of their people was arrested or tortured by Ekiugbo people. He said they were robbing in the town, including an Oceanic Bank vehicle. They were using these vehicles to go and attack the people, and I should please send reinforcement. He also said that, meanwhile, he had sent the divisional police officer, DPO, Ughelli, and an inspector there. I then ordered my commander, Moblie, to send more men to go and help him because he said apart from the fact that these two men were killed, he also saw smoke everywhere. He said the DPO was waylaid and killed in cold blood with the inspector. I then asked about some houses I learnt were burnt. He said no policeman torched any house, that only these people knew what they did, that after the killing of the DPO and inspector, Afiesere

split into two. Some were really against the killing of these policemen and some were for it. Because they were divided, they started burning their houses. And I tend to believe them because when I went there, I saw that if the policemen were to burn down that town, there are multimillion naira worth of houses there. The houses torched were all shanties. I don't know if you saw the spot where the policemen were killed - it's about two kilometres to the place that buildings were burnt. So, I don't believe my men burnt down anything. It is so painful that my DPO and inspector were killed. Evidence available showed that they were killed by Afiesere people. Apart from killing them, they relieved the DPO of his AK47 rifle which, luckily, has been recovered. It was brought by Afiesere people, through the Ovie.

Your claim that only shanty houses were burnt is not true. I was there and I personally counted over 60 houses and shops. One big hotel was even burnt, owned by the vice chairman of Ughelli North Local Government council?

The vice chairman is the main suspect we are looking for. He's now on the run. Yes, he's the mastermind of all these things. He's the one that planned the whole thing. It was planned in his hotel. We are looking for him.



Ekpoudom: 'I don't believe that my men burnt down anything'