

Tension Grips Abuja, Many Feared Killed in Shiites, Army Clashes

October 30, 2018 5:40 am

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Palpable tension gripped Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) yesterday as the clashes between members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) and the Army entered its second day, with the group, also known as Shiites, claiming that about 15 of its adherents were killed.

The military refused to confirm the Shiites' claim last night as the Director of Defence Information, Brig-Gen John Agim, said he could not speak on the matter as it was purely the business of the Army.

"People have been calling me and I told them I don't have information about it. When there's something purely Army, you should speak to the Army PRO," he said.

Several calls made to the Director of Army Public Relations, Brig-Gen Texas Chukwu, were not answered. A text message sent to him was not replied either.

Like last Sunday, the seat of the federal government had erupted in violent confrontation between the Islamic group and the Army as Shiites continued with their protest of the continued detention of their leader, Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, by the Department of State Services (DSS) despite multiple orders of court for his release.

Yesterday's clash began with the convergence of the Shiites at the nation's capital for the annual Arbaeen symbolic trek, which also served as cover for a protest march against the continued detention of their spiritual leader by the federal authorities.

Violent scenes marred the rituals, officially due to end today as some of the sect members were killed in the confrontation with the Army in the Maraba- Nyanya metropolis of Abuja.

When the crisis first unfolded on Saturday, troops from the Army Headquarters Garrison at Zuba, Gwagwalada Area Council of the FCT, reportedly gunned down five followers of the sect. The Army, however, claimed responsibility for three deaths.

Since the clash at Zuba, there has been heavy security presence in all the major entry points into the city, in an attempt to curb anarchy and loss of lives. Soldiers and policemen manned public parks, the federal secretariat and other major government institutions.

The Shiite procession caused a heavy gridlock on the ever busy Kubwa Expressway, while the military and the police made combined the efforts to put the situation under control.

However, about 5p.m., tempers boiled over as the military and the sect clashed in the Kugbo area near Abuja, when the group marched towards the military check point, in defiance of the heavy security presence.

The clashes disrupted the free flow of traffic while many pedestrians scampered for safety.

The leader of the Shiite sect, Abdullahi Mohammed, told THISDAY that more than 15 members of the sect were killed when the military opened fire on them at the Nyanya Check Point in the Kugbo, Old Karu Area.

He said in spite of the casualties, they remained upbeat and would march on today to mark the end of the Arbaeen ritual.

"I can tell you that more than 15 members of our group were killed when the Army opened fire on our procession as soon as we approached the check point. I survived the shootings because I was not in the front, while the victims were those in the front column of the procession," Mohammed said. The Commander Army Headquarters Garrison, Maj-Gen James Myam, had in a statement on Sunday, said the troops opened fire in self defence, when they came under Shiites' attack in Zuba, while escorting ammunitions and missiles from Abuja to the Army Central Ammunition Depot in Kaduna State.

Myam said the sect established an illegal road block and denied motorists free passage.

According to him, when the troops' convoy attempted to clear the road block, they met stiff opposition from the sect, who pelted them with stones and other dangerous items, in the process, smashing both military and civilian vehicles' windscreens and windows.