

A tussle for the control of an oil palm plantation has claimed the life of a woman. Yet, the crisis is not over as **CLEMENT JAMES** reports from Calabar



A vandalised truck

5 Sunday, March 19, 2017 will go down in the history of Oku Bushuyu, a village in Boki Local Government Area of Cross River State, as a day the devil invaded the hitherto sleepy village and stirred up agony and a severe spasm of pain.

It was the day Police allegedly stormed the village and in the confusion that ensued, a 46-year-old woman, Hannah Bukie Ettah, was sent to her untimely grave, leaving her husband, children and the entire village in tears.

Hannah, from investigations carried out by this reporter, was a victim of the saying that "when two elephants fight, the grass suffers." She lost her life to a tussle between some prominent Boki indigenes, who are in government and who apparently

are laying mines against each other in preparation for the 2019 elections.

Currently lying stiff at a private morgue in Okunde, an emerging town nurtured by the likes of late Chief Mathew Mbu, Hannah Ettah's corpse continues to cry for justice from the state government.

As it stands, nobody knows when she would be buried and whose responsibility it is to bury her.

The Police, who was allegedly involved in the killing, have washed their hands off the matter.

Those involved in the crisis prefer to train their muscles towards the impending fight than bother about the dead.

Others, who sustained injury during the shooting, included one Baron Odu and her daughter Mary, while one Owan Joseph alleged that he lost his personal belongings to some hoodlums in the course of the fracas.

In the meantime, the crisis between some key players in government has to do with who takes charge of the Boki Oil Palm Estate.

The estate, said to be more than 60 years old and with an approximate 428 hectares of land, is owned by four communities in Boki and they are; Osokom, Borum, Irruan and Oku Bushuyi.

According to an elder statesman and the chairman of the Accredited Landlord Community of the Boki Oil Palm Estate, 82-year-old Sir Pius Eisong, the estate was founded by Dr. Michael Okpara, then Premier of the Eastern region as a farm settlement in 1962.

After the creation of states, Chief Mathew Mbu waded into the administration of the settlement and became its life chairman.

"When Mbu discovered that he was becoming weak and would not be able to continue to shoulder the day-to-day administration of the settlement, he handed over the place to us in 2008 and became the adviser. Worthy of note is the fact that royalties that accrued from the farm settlement was used to establish the Boki Boys High School which

is now a comprehensive school," the Octogenarian said in an interview with Journalists at his country home in Okunde.

Bisong, a one-time councillor during Clement Ebrri's era representing Ogep ward in Boki, explained that after the war and in due course, the name was changed to Boki Oil Palm estate to reflect the location of the estate.

According to him: "In 2012, when government planned the privatization of some government estates, we indicated interest and wanted the estate to be privatized. This did not happen as we expected that Boki oil palm estate would be privatized along with Ibiaye and Calero Oil palm estates."

Speaking on the current crisis, Bisong pointedly accused the Secretary to the State Government, Mrs. Tina Agbor and the Special Adviser on Infrastructure, Mr. Machomy Agan of "generating and fuelling the crisis."

But both officers denied this allegation. However, indigenes of Oku Bushuyi who were interviewed during a fact-finding mission by some Journalists blamed the Secretary to the government for the crisis.

They said until now, the estate was allotted on the basis of Small Holders' Scheme, whereby those who owned plots there were required to make some payment to the government through the Accredited Landlords.

So far, more than 400 plots have been allocated and there are still more plots yet to be allocated. According to the Secretary of the Accredited Landlord Community of the estate, Mr. Anthony Obi, who is also the head of Personnel in Boki Council headquarters, those who paid for the plots are yet to exhaust their tenure, which he said expires in July, when the SSG decided to set up a 12-man committee "with herself as chairman" to take over the estate.

"Using the Special Adviser to the governor on Infrastructure, the SSG printed 1, 000 forms and sold

them for N1000 each to people when the tenure of those who had paid money has not expired. This crisis started when the SSG decided to use her position to send Policemen to our village to brutalize and kill people," Obi explained.

When confronted to explain her own side of the story, the SSG, Mrs. Tina Agbor rebuffed Journalists and said she would not have the time for that. Her words; "I am not going to have that time now. When the time comes, I will say something."

She added a threat: "If anybody mentions my name, I will sue that person."

However, the Special Adviser on Infrastructure, Mr. Machomy Agan, explained that he was given the permission to take over the estate on September 1, 2016.

According to him, those who allocated the plots in the estate inserted ghost names and mismanaged the estate.

Agan said the rent of present occupants expired since last year and they were expected to renew their tenancy "through my office," vowing to take over the place at all cost.

Asked if there was a letter to that effect from the state, Agan kept mute and also did not give a categorical answer to the question as to whether he is a member of the 12-man committee allegedly set up by the SSG to manage the estate.

He was irked by the fact that some people in previous government had held tenaciously to the estate "and would not want to let go of it."

Unfortunately, not only did the crisis claim the life of Hannah. A visit to the village showed signs of crisis. Some houses were destroyed while a lorry loaded with palm fruits was attacked and vandalized.

Besides, our correspondent noticed that some people were vacating the estate, apparently to avoid danger.

The Police, on its part, have been arresting and bringing their suspects to Calabar.

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