

Drug war: Gunmen invade church, kill 19 worshippers

August 7, 2017 Pamela Eboh and Okegwo Kenechukwu



Tears flowed like a stream yesterday at Ozubulu in Ekwusigo Local Government Area of Anambra State as five gunmen invaded St. Philip Catholic Church about 7:30a.m. and shot indiscriminately at the worshippers. When the gunmen left, 19 of those attending the early morning Mass, among them children, lay dead. Witnesses said that 15 people died instantly while four out of the 18 who were injured and were taken to Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital (NAUTH), Nnewi died later. New Telegraph learnt that the shooting was as a result of a fracas between drug barons based in South Africa, who are indigenes of the town. At NAUTH, relatives of the victims thronged the hospital while some were weeping uncontrollably.

Doctors and nurses at the hospital were trying to save the lives of the injured ones. Sympathisers blocked the old Nnewi Onitsha Road as everybody was trying to get to the hospital to find out whether his or her relation was a victim. Efforts to see and speak with the victims were rebuffed by security officials at the hospital. An indigene of Ozubulu, Mr. Ike Ofomata, said the gunmen stormed the church while the mass was going on and started shooting and people started running and screaming. He said: “There was absolute chaos. At first, I was confused and I immediately lay flat on the floor.

Two seconds after I lay down, a young man who was beside me during the service was shot in the ear. He screamed and fell beside me and died on the spot.” Though police said that only eight people were killed, witnesses said that 19 people were killed. Among the dead was, Pa Akunwafor Ikegwuonwu, the father of a South Africa-based businessman, Aloysius, who built and donated the church to Nnewi Diocese.

Pa Ikegwuonwu’s wife was shot in her right arm and still on

admission at the teaching hospital. One of the survivors, Mr. Stephen Ohamadike, said the gunmen entered the church as they were about to begin prayer of the faithful. He said: “Those of us who were to say the prayers of the faithful had just assembled at the altar and I had Number 2 which meant that I was to say the prayer for Nigeria.

Suddenly, I saw someone who was putting on a cap with others shooting indiscriminately inside the church. “There was pandemonium and in the midst of the confusion, I just lay down on the floor. The officiating priest and the Mass servers quickly left the altar and the Mass came to an abrupt end. “I counted 11 dead people and many were wounded.

I used the vehicle belonging to Pa Akunwafor Ikegwuonwu to take him and his wife and others to Evans Hospital where the doctors advised us to go to the teaching hospital. I used the car to convey many other people to the hospital before I came back to Amakwa.”

The parish priest of the church, Rev Father Jude Onwuaso, declined comment on the incident, saying that the Bishop had directed that only the Diocesan Director of Communications should speak on the matter. It was learnt that the businessman (the man at the centre of the crisis) had been in town for a while and only left a few hours before the invaders stormed the town. Other sources said that the gunmen, who invaded the church with the hope of getting the businessman there, stormed his home and killed his father before getting away.

Although worshipers said five men invaded the church, the state Commissioner of Police, Mr. Garba Umar, said it was only a gunman. Umar said the attacker must be an indigene of the area. According to him, after shooting his targeted victims, the attacker still killed and wounded other worshippers.

He said: “We gathered that worshippers at 6a.m. Sunday Mass at St. Philip Catholic Church, Ozubulu were in the service when a gunman dressed in black attire covering his face with a fez cap entered the church and moved straight to a particular direction and opened fire.

“From our findings, it is very clear that the person who carried out the attack must be an indigene of the area.” Umar said though no arrest had been made but the police already learnt that the attack followed a quarrel between two natives of Ozubulu residing abroad. While describing the act as sacrilegious, the commissioner said it was wrong for the perpetrators to extend their quarrel to the church. According to him, such conduct shows the people behind it do not fear God. While promising that those behind the act would be brought to justice, Umar said the police had launched a manhunt to fish out the culprits.

The Catchiest of St Philips Parish, Mr. Calistus Ikeanumba, told journalists that the incident occurred immediately after homily. He said: “We were about to take the prayers of the faithful and suddenly a man barged into the church and opened fire on the people.

The parish Priest, Rev Fr. Jude Onwuaso, who immediately removed his cassock, and I took cover at Sir Christi. Before we knew what was happening, about 10 people were already lying in their pool of blood. When they were rushed to the Teaching Hospital, they were

confirmed dead on arrival.” Another witness said it was only one gunman who went inside the church while those who were outside said the other gunmen were stationed outside the church. A commercial motorcyclist, who did not want his name in print, said a notable man in the community based in South Africa was having issues with some of the boys from village whom he took to South Africa.

He said: “Trouble started when some of these boys were dying one after the other. The man was accused of using them for drug business without settling them. Our source said one of the boys who attempted to challenge him was suddenly assassinated and his colleagues came on a revenge mission.

“The man is a big man in his village. He was at home last Tuesday but left on Thursday. The attackers did not know he had left and when they got to the church and did not find him, they shot his father and sprayed bullets on other innocent worshippers.” Anambra State Governor, Willie Obiano, who visited the scene to ascertain the situation, condemned the attack.

He assured the people that an investigation into the incident would commence immediately. The governor said that his administration would ensure the perpetrators of the evil act were apprehended and brought to justice. He said: “We can’t allow this to happen in Anambra State, we must get the people involved to face the music.”

Obiano said intelligence report linked the shooting to an existing feud existing between some members of Umuezekwe Ofufe Amakwa community of Ozubulu living abroad. He said: “It is an isolated case and I urge worshippers in the church and residents of the area to go about their normal activities.” Obiano later visited the injured persons receiving treatment at NAUTH. He promised that government would pay the hospital bills of the victims. The governor also said that 50 doctors had been mobilised to the hospital to assist in providing the best medical care to the injured.

He also visited Our Lady of Assumption Catholic Cathedral, Nnewi, where he addressed a congregation of worshippers. Also the Catholic Bishop of Awka Diocese, Most Rev. Paulinus Ezeokafor and his Nnewi counterpart, Bishop Hilary Okeke, described the killing as senseless.

Ezeokafor said: “What on earth could make someone to start taking lives which they cannot reproduce? People no longer have regards for human lives. “People killing people as if they are chickens? I am seriously saddened by this ugly development. The worst part of it is that the dastardly act was perpetrated in a place of worship, house of God.”