



Blood, tears as govt demolishes Owerri Main Market

•Two feared dead

•CLO wants involvement of soldiers investigated

Steve Uzoechi
Owerri

It was sorrow, tears and blood in Owerri, the Imo State capital, yesterday, as the state

government began the demolition of the Owerri Main Market, otherwise known as Eke-Ukwu Owerri.

The exercise commenced barely hours after the 48-hour ultimatum given to traders and residents within the vicinity of the market to vacate the area before Saturday.

As early as 5 am, government had deployed bulldozers, policemen, soldiers, Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) and other officials to enforce the demolition and relocation of the over 200-year-old ancestral market of the Owerri people.

Literarily, terror was visited on the small Owerri community as

a combined team of policemen, soldiers and other officials in more than 15 Hilux trucks, swept into the Douglas Road area of the city, shooting sporadically, battering people and looting shops and wares.

Although it is not yet clear the number of casualties caught up

in the incident, but according to unconfirmed reports, two persons were feared dead – one being a 12-year-old boy, Somtochukwu Igboanusi, who was said to be helping his parents to safeguard goods in their shop around the multi-

Also in the same area, a Vanguard Newspaper reporter, Chinonso Alozie, was attacked allegedly on the orders of a government official. In spite of repeated attempts to identify himself as a journalist, Alozie was brutally beaten up by thugs from Ohaji-Egbema, who flogged him with electric cables and forced him to delete pictures and videos of the demolition he captured with his phone.

In the Rotibi Area, suspected thugs recruited from Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area, by one of the governor's top aides from the area, were seen looting and snatching goods from people right under the supervision of armed policemen.

Goods and merchandize littered the road as people fled from the rampaging demolition party.

sighted being carried to safety by local youths.

Eyewitnesses confirmed that about five persons who sustained bullet wounds were

President-General of Owerri Community Assembly, Felix Ngoka, said that Governor Rochas Okorocha has indicated that he would demolish the Eke-Ukwu Owerri Market in defiance of an existing court order restraining the governor from demolishing or relocating the market.

Speaking to newsmen yesterday following the 48-hour ultimatum

He added that their ancestors had warned the community against the relocation of the market, saying: "If we do, calamity will befall us and we are not ready to die when we can avoid it. I know my people and they will resist this attack with their blood. All our ancestral lands have been taken away without due compensation, now how can we relocate our ancestral heritage of over 200 years to another local government area?"

However, in a press statement, Governor Okorocha's spokesman, Sam Onwuemeodo, described the demolition as long overdue.

He noted that the demolition and relocation of the market was in line with the urban renewal programme of the state government. He maintained that Douglas Road has remained a refuse dump for the traders and needed to be reclaimed.

Uche Wisdom Durueke, President of the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) in the state, in a press statement, condemned the invasion and demolition of Ekeukwu Owerre Market by the Imo State Government, despite a subsisting order of court restraining the governor and his agents from demolishing the said market.

The statement read: "This act of executive lawlessness should out rightly be condemned by all who believe in democracy and rule of law. It is disheartening to note that the Imo State Government is now reputed as having no respect for orders of the court.

"The CLO condemns the use of soldiers by the Imo State Government in effecting the demolition exercise. This is unwarranted and illegal. There is no basis for the use of soldiers. By our constitution, our soldiers are meant to protect the country from external aggression. They are not on internal security duties except in special circumstances. The demolition of Ekeukwu Owerre does not require the presence of soldiers. There is no gainsaying that the Police Force and Civil Defence Corps are both well equipped to provide security during the demolition exercise. It is therefore necessary that the use of soldiers in the demolition exercise should be investigated," the statement read.

The CLO urged the Imo State Government to halt further demolition and develop a strategy of engaging a cross strata of the stakeholders on the subject matter for healing and finding a sustainable and peaceful pathway on the issue