

Seeking peace after bloodbath in Ebonyi, C'River communities

After repeatedly unleashing terror on each other leaving many killed, the people of Igbeagu community in Izzi Local Government Area of Ebonyi State and their neighbours in Ukele, Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State have finally agreed to sheath their swords, reports UCHENNA INYA

Since June 26 this year, over 20 persons have been killed with many houses and other valuable properties worth millions of naira burnt when two neighbouring communities of Igbeagu and their neighbours in Ukele renewed their rivalry.

The two communities, who had been intermarrying and doing other things together, first had problems in 2005 over boundary matters.

According to Sunday Telegraph's investigation, the current flash points are found in Izzi/Yala axis, Abakaliki/Obubra axis, Ikwo/Obubra area, Ikwo/Abi area and Izzi/Ukele.

In the renewed Izzi/Ukele axis 'war', over 20 persons were killed with many houses and other valuable properties razed. The combatants killed pregnant women, children and the elderly.

Following the communal violence, residents of the two communities relocated to other nearby communities to seek refuge.

When the crisis resurfaced, there was little or no human and vehicular movements on the popular Tran-Sahara Highway in the area which connects Cameroon with Nigeria as travellers were afraid of being caught by stray bullets which were fired intermittently by the warlords.

Travellers heading to Taraba and Cross River states and Cameroon through the highway had to turn back including trucks ferrying petroleum products and kerosene to Cross River State.

The situation forced the Ebonyi State Deputy Governor, Dr. Kelechi Igwe, to visit the area where he addressed the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and urged them to remain calm.

However, while he was addressing the IDPs in their camp at Ndiakparata, heavy gunfire was heard at the Cross River State axis of the scene, forcing the Deputy Governor to end his speech abruptly. He ordered troops and other security agents accompanying him to the area to contain the shooting.

The frequent skirmishes has forced many displaced Izzi people out of their camps as many of them were seen on the West African Tran-Sahara Highway, trekking with their



Two traditional rulers of Igbeagu and Ukele communities embrace at the peace parley



Some members of the community listening to officials

belongings to Abakaliki to seek refuge.

There was also fresh arson in the area during the Deputy Governor's visit to the IDPs. Also, a young man, who was shot on the face, was found lying helpless at the Igbeagu axis of the war zone. He was taken to the hospital by some policemen in a Hilux van.

The Chairman of the Izzi Local Government, Hon. Paul Nwogha, alleged that over 1,500 houses at Igbeagu were burnt while about 10,000 people had been displaced.

"It is difficult to quote exactly the figures but I can tell you that seven villages have already been evacuated, not even a single goat will you see.

"Animals were not even spared, talk much less of humans. It is a worrisome figure. I am sure that 7,000 persons have been displaced and I am also sure that about 1,500 houses have been burnt by the invaders.

"It is so difficult to quote the number of casualties because we are still finding bodies. If you move into the villages, you will pick one or two corpses before you enter a compound.

"This place is very populous and we are yet to even respond to this attack. Our people are peaceful."

A youth group in Izzi dan identified as Izzi Nnodo Youth Forum comprising Ebonyi, Izzi and Abakaliki local government areas of the state had blamed the lingering inter-communal clashes between the Igbeagu and Ukele on Governor Ben Ayade of Cross River state and the National Boundary Commission (NBC).

President of the Forum, Hon. Ben Nwovu regretted that the crisis had degenerated to the level it is presently and condemned the killing of Izzi people during the crisis.

According to him, the displaced persons were suffering because the intervention by

the state government to mitigate the effect of the crisis was not enough even as he called on the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to come to the aid of the displaced persons in the state.

Nwovu further blamed the NBC for not responding to boundary issues in the country, noting that if a permanent demarcation had been done when the dispute began in 2005, the land disputes between Ebonyi and Cross River would have been a thing of the past.

"I condemn totally the crisis between Ukele in Cross River State and Igbeagu in Izzi Local Government Area. I condemn it in the strongest terms because such crisis should not arise now. Whatever is the matter, both sides should liaise with relevant authorities to resolve their differences.

"As the president of the clan, I have gone to my people and they have assured me that they will not go for reprisal attacks. But it has become obvious that the people of Ukele cannot allow our people to sleep with their two eyes closed.

"With the recent intervention of the governor of Ebonyi State, we thought the crisis has ended. But immediately the Deputy Governor left the area, the Cross River people come back to attack them," he alleged.

But Vincent Egbu the Community Relations Officer to Governor Ben Ayade of Cross River State, blamed the crisis on the people of Izzi community, who, he said, attacked the Ukele people in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State.

Narrating how the incident occurred, Egbu said: "We were already at the meeting venue waiting for the arrival of the DPOs from Yala and Izzi local government areas when some youths invaded the venue of the meeting and shot into the crowd and wounded

many people. "They are the aggressors and all our people have been trying to do is to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict yet they keep launching attacks on us."

A resident in the area, Patrick Ege, said the perennial land conflict between the people of Ukele in Cross River State and their Izzi counterparts in Ebonyi State started following a gun attack on a Ukele villager.

He alleged that the shooting occurred at Ijibolo village when the villagers were returning from a meeting on Wednesday evening, leaving many people with gunshot wounds.

He said: "There was a serious attack on my village, Ijibolo, when the Izzi people waylaid villagers who were returning from a meeting and many people sustained gunshot wounds."

However, one of the victims in Izzi, Onwe Nneka, told our correspondent that her elder brother, Ikechukwu Ogbonna, was beheaded and that she lost her house and other valuables as they were all burnt.

She said: "We were sleeping when Cross River people invaded our area and before we knew it, they had killed many people and burnt houses. They killed pregnant women, children and elderly ones.

"They burnt my house and I did not bring out anything from it, I only brought my five children out of the house. They killed my brother, Ikechukwu Ogbonna, and cut off his head."

However on Tuesday, the NBC waded into the dispute. Director General of the commission, Mohammed Ahmed met with the two warring communities at Nfam, Cross River State with top security officials in attendance.

Youth leaders and traditional rulers of the warring communities embraced each other under the admiration of the NBC and other stakeholders present during the meeting as mark of peace and reconciliation.

Speaking at the peace meeting, Ahmed decried the hostilities in the two communities.

"The story of June 26 is not palatable especially now we are facing security challenges in the country. We have come here to find solution and by God's grace we will find the solution. We came in order to have peace. Why do we destroy our houses, why do we kill ourselves? We must live in peace. Youth leaders of these areas must tell us they have embraced peace.

"Our mothers who brought us up are very compassionate about life and they must talk to our children on the need to embrace peace. We are very hopeful that the opportunity has been created for us to come and establish a boundary. We have agreed on cessation of hostilities, we have agreed on reopening of schools, we are agreed that at a certain time we will embark on mopping up of arms and ammunitions among the people," he said.

An Army officer, Col. Stanley Ojeforo, Deputy Commander 13 Brigade Border, who was at the peace meeting, called for mopping up of arms in the warring communities to achieve the desired peace. He therefore urged the warlords to submit their arms in order to end the crisis totally.

"When this crisis started, I called the DPOs of these areas and they responded and we started going from house to house, community to community to tell stop the crisis."

Earlier, the Deputy Governor of Cross River State, Professor Isu told the NBC to do the needful by establishing clear boundaries between the two states. While on his part, Deputy Governor of Ebonyi, Dr. Igwe explained that several efforts have been made to end the crisis but that it seems the efforts have not yielded the desired result.

He thus called on the two neighbouring communities to embrace genuine peace, describing peace as panacea to development.



Onwe Nneka of Igbeagu community whose brother was beheaded