

# 16 killed, women raped over dredging



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By



Tension has enveloped two communities, the Ajah-ljebu and Ajah-Ilaje, both in Eti-Osa Local Government Area of Lagos State, following bloody clashes that left more than 16 people dead, including a policeman.

The fight, which started over bickering of who had the right over a sand dredging site, has witnessed death of 16 people, over 60 houses burnt and women raped.

The Ajah-ljebu insisted that the land belonged to them and that the Ajah-Ilaje, who are dredging the land for business purposes, should be paying them royalty. This, in a nutshell, is the crux of the present conflict. The former conflict was over land ownership.

Some of the Ajah-Ilaje people that were killed have been identified as Augustine Oronla, Oke Oronla, Ahmed, Timothy and David. The corpses of the aforementioned and others have been deposited at Marina General Hospital, Lagos Island.

It was gathered that during one of the clashes, women from Ajah-ljebu were allegedly raped and students from Ajah-Ilaje, were allegedly prevented from going to school. Women from Ajah-Ilaje were also prevented from going to market to sell their wares.

Our correspondent gathered that the tension between the two communities started since 2011, when the Ajah-Ilaje people started sand dredging operation in their domain, and allegedly refused to give their host community, the Ajah-ljebu their dues. This led to the present crisis ravaging both communities, with properties worth billions of naira alleged to have been destroyed.

The spokesperson for the Ajah-Ilaje, people, Reverend Oluwale Oduwale, said: "It was our forefathers that bought the land from the Ajah-ljebu people, who are our host in 1984. Since that transaction, both communities had been living in peace."

He continued: "When our forefather settled in the present place where we are now, it was true that they met people here. We had a deed of transfer; our forefather's paid per plot, and we have all been living in peace until 2011 when this crisis started.

"In 2012, One Oloye, from Ajah-ljebu and his hoodlums suddenly invaded our community, burning houses and destroying property. At least, seven people were killed. When we couldn't endure it, we called the Rapid Response Squad (RRS) to save us. When this entire crisis was going on, the issue of dredging had not come up at Ajah-Ilaje waterside."

Oduwale added that: "In 2015, a dredging company came into the community, but we didn't benefit from the company or its operations. In 2018, another dredging company came and out of the nine beaches, where dredgers are operating, Ajah-ljebu is controlling six, while three beaches belong to us.

"We are not fighting them; we're only maintaining our three beaches. The dredging activities were going on smoothly, and we were using the proceeds from the dredging to maintain and develop our community.

"One fateful night, we were asleep when some hoodlums invaded our community and started looting properties. They burnt houses, and killed Kehinde Asiwaju. They also injured several people."

Oduwale explained that when the mayhem was becoming too much, with people being killed and injured, he and others wrote a petition to the Chairman of the Eti-Osa Local Government. Thereafter, a peace meeting was called and the matter was resolved.

The fragile peace, which was created in 2012, shattered in 2019, after some hoodlums' invaded Ajah-Ilaje community, burnt down houses and vandalised vehicles.

According to Oduwale, on another fateful day, hoodlums from Ajah-Ijebu, allegedly stormed their community and went to a woman's shop, where they forcibly collected N150, 000 from her.

He said: "When soldiers, who came to our rescue, arrested two of the hoodlums, they recovered guns from them. Some of our children, who are in the public primary and secondary schools, situated at Ajah-Ijebu, were always threatened. As I speak with you now, third term examination is ongoing, but our children couldn't participate because of the constant harassment they had been receiving from the hoodlums.

"On June, 20, we attended another peace meeting, where a peace accord was signed. Two days after the signing of the peace accord, some hoodlums from Ajah-Ijebu invaded our community and burnt down our houses. We wrote to the Chief Judge of Lagos, Department of State Security Service (DSS), and other security agencies in the state. Nothing was done about the situation. Before they end killing every one of us, government should set up a tribunal, where the matter can be resolved amicably. In fact, right now, many people are battling to live in different hospitals."

Mr. Akin Okunuwa, a resident of Ajah-Ilaje, whose house was burnt, disclosed that since he lost his home, he had been squatting with friends.

His words: "On May 27, I received a phone call that my house had gone up in flame. Before I got to the scene, it had burnt to the ground."

Another victim, Apostle Adewale Ebiwa, whose house was also burnt on the same day as that of Okunuwa, said: "Since my house was burnt, I have been living in fear. It was after the Lagos State Commissioner of Police visited our community and promised to deploy policemen that we started sleeping with our two eyes shut. And this was only after the arrival of the policemen in the communities. Even with the deployment of the policemen, residents are moving out of our community in droves.

"We have lost billions of naira to this crisis. Some burnt houses were later renovated by their owners. But shockingly, the hoodlums returned to burn the houses again."

When our correspondent went round Ilaje-Ajah community, several churches and private schools had been destroyed.

Master Omotuyole Adesoji (17), a Senior Secondary School Student, who was allegedly harassed by some hoodlums from Ajah-Ijebu, alleged that he was prevented from joining his mates to participate in the ongoing third term examination.

Adesoji recounted: "Whenever some of my schoolmates and I, are returning from school, the hoodlums would accost and start threatening to kill us. It was because of the threat that we all stopped going to school."

The General Secretary of Ojupon and Obisemo ruling house under Ajah-Ijebu community, Alhaji Kabiru Ademoritan, said it was the Ajah-Ilaje people that first invaded their community on June 18, 2019, killing one Oloyo and two other persons. When they allegedly tried to recover the bodies for proper burial, the killers descended on them.

He said: "When the area commander came to restore normalcy, a policeman was shot. I was told the man is battling to live in a hospital right now. Our Baale, Musikilu Ojupon, had made several efforts to ensure peace returns to both communities, but his efforts appear to be futile. Our Baale was also accused of buying 100 guns for hoodlums to attack the Ajah-Ilaje

community. All these allegations are baseless. We have been at the receiving ends of this crisis. The Ilaje people have also burnt houses and carted away people's goods in our community. There was a time we held a peace meeting and after it, the fighting and killings continued. The land, which the Ajah-Ilaje's are occupying today, was bought from our forefathers. The Ajah-Ilaje forefathers had expansionist tendency. We have never demanded money from the Ajah-Ilaje people since they started their dredging business.

"Our youths never threatened any of their children from going to school. Our people had never stopped their women from going to the market to sell. We have also written to the Ministry of Waterfront and Infrastructure Development to put a stop to the dredging activities so as to curb the crisis. They're hiding under the guise of dredging to cause trouble. We're peace loving people. We are their host; if we don't want them in our midst, our forefathers wouldn't have allowed them to enter into the community in the first place."