

Four youths, fleeing police arrest, drown in Lagos lagoon



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Residents of Iga-Onitolo, Elegbata community on the Lagos Island, have been plunged into mourning following the drowning of four youths in the lagoon.

The residents said the death of the four boys was caused by operatives of the Anti-Cultism Unit, Lagos State Police Command. The incident occurred on Wednesday last week.

Our correspondent, who went to the grieving community, was told that 10 youths jumped into the lagoon to escape policemen chasing them. Four of the boys died, while six survived. Among the four, only two bodies have been retrieved, while two are still missing. The six survivors were fished out of the lagoon by fishermen.

On that fateful October 9, residents were rudely awakened from their sleep by sounds of gunshots. The time was 1a.m. Witnesses claimed that 20 of the armed policemen wore uniform, while four men with them were in mufti. Residents insisted that the policemen stormed the community at that ungodly hour in order to raid some youths.

One of the survivors, Toheeb Jumat, recollected that when the policemen came, he and other youths were sleeping. He said it was a normal scene on the Lagos Island for youths to start running after sighting policemen.

He said: “Immediately we sighted the policemen coming towards where we were sleeping, we all ran in different directions. Ten of us went towards the lagoon, with the hope that they wouldn’t follow us. Unfortunately, they followed us. When we got to the bank of the lagoon, some of us hid near an abandoned Marine Police speedboat, hoping that they wouldn’t come after us. But shockingly, the boys in mufti who followed the policemen came after us. That was how we started jumping into the lagoon to evade arrest.

“We held the bar of the bridge, so that the current wouldn’t carry us away. While we were holding the bar, those in mufti brought out scissors and started stabbing us. They meant to kill us. When the policemen reached the water, they started shooting directly into the water. Thank God I survived. It was some fishermen, who were going for a fishing expedition that rescued six of us after the policemen had gone. Unfortunately, four of our friends didn’t survive.”

The story of another survivor, Mr. Happy Peter, was similar to what Jumat said.

He said: “We were chased into the lagoon. We’re not criminals. We’re law-abiding citizens of Nigeria. I don’t know why they wanted to kill us. While trying to hide from the policemen near the river, one of the policemen came to where I was hiding and dragged me out. He then pushed me into the lagoon. Before I knew what was happening, he started shooting in my direction. I quickly swam away from the spot he focused his shots. The police mission was to kill all of us. But they succeeded in killing four of us.

“After the policemen had left, I tried to come out of the lagoon, but one of the civilian boys that came with them, hit me with an object immediately I placed my hands on the bridge railing. I fell back into the lagoon.

“When one of the bodies was brought out of the lagoon, there were marks on his neck and his head, indicating that he was stabbed. We

went through a lot. It was when we were calling for help that the fishermen, who were going for fishing, came to rescue us.”

Other survivors are Samuel, Damola Wale, Yinka, and Fuad. The two men brought out dead were identified as Femi and David.

A 75-year-old resident, who identified himself simply as Freeman, said he was sleeping outside the compound when the policemen arrived.

He added: “Before I knew what was happening, they started shooting. Immediately I heard the gunshots, I stood up from where I was sleeping to find out what was happening. It was then I saw the policemen and four other civilians who accompanied them. The policemen were not familiar with our area. We believe that the four civilians led the policemen to our community.

“When the policemen saw me, two of them came to where I was standing. They demanded to know what I was doing. I told them that I came outside when I heard the gunshots. I believe it was because of my age that they ordered me to return to my room.

“Unfortunately, a 15 year-old-boy, Samuel, who was sleeping beside me, was whisked away. Five other boys were also picked from their apartments where they were sleeping. The boys were bundled into the police van. The harassment from the police is becoming unbearable. Even if they want to arrest the hoodlums, I don’t see the reason for chasing them into the lagoon.”

It was also learnt that in an attempt to arrest another youth, two policemen scaled a fence to gain access into his apartment. Unfortunately, the person they were looking for was not at home.

The lucky boy’s mother, who gave her name simply as Iya Bose, explained that she was sleeping with her physically-challenged son when the policemen scaled the fence and landed in her compound. They then forced their way into her apartment.

She recalled: “Immediately the two policemen entered my apartment, they started shouting the name of my son. They shouted that he should come out from wherever he was hiding. It was when I came out that I saw Azeez, who lives at Onala; he was directing and

instructing the policemen on what to do. When they eventually saw my physically-challenged son, the policemen thought it was the one they were looking. Without asking questions, they pounced and started beating him. I screamed and begged them to leave him. I told them that he was not the person they were looking for. Before I realised what was happening, they had injured him. When Azeez realised that the policemen were beating the wrong person, he urged them to leave.”

The woman said that like other residents, she was also tired of constant harassments from policemen.

She added: “My son is not a member of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW). What I heard the following day was that the policemen came to our community on the instructions of a member of the NURTW on the Island. I want the Lagos State Commissioner of Police to come to our aid. We’re suffering in the hands of policemen on this island.”

A trader in the community, Mr. Ademola Adetunji, described the death of the four youths as unfortunate. He said that most youths in the community were gainfully employed. This is even as he stressed that the youth were not members of the NURTW.

He said: “I just don’t know what the policemen want the parents of the dead boys to do now. We’re still waiting for the remaining two bodies to be washed up so that we can give them befitting burials. The deceased were sleeping after the day’s work when the policemen stormed the community. About 25 youths were arrested.

“We also heard that they were charged to Yaba Magistrates’ Court on Monday. This is an injustice. We’re all Nigerians. I don’t understand why they are maltreating us as if we are second class citizens. We know what to do, but we didn’t want to take the law into our hands.

Adetunji said at a time some bad boys, selling Indian hemp, infiltrated the community residents partnered with the police and chased them out away.

He said: “We did that to prevent break down of law and order in our community. Most of the youth in Elegbata are gainfully employed.

Whenever we noticed strangers among the youth, we call the person. We tell him the dos and don'ts of our community.

“Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu should come to our rescue. The policemen have turned us to Automated Teller Machine (ATM). Whenever they arrest someone, they demand between N100,000 and N200,000 for bail. We want peace on the Island, especially in Elegbata. We are not trouble-makers. We mind our businesses. Police should stop disturbing us.”

One of the youth in the community, Shamsideen Owolayo, said they had been subjected to a series of harassment because they didn't support a member of the NURTW at Onala area of Idumota.

He said: “This member vied for the state chairmanship of the union in the last election.”

Owolayo added that the civilians who accompanied the policemen to the community were working for the NURTW branch chairman.

Owolayo explained that last Sunday, before the Wednesday invasion by the policemen, one of their friends, Bayo, was shot dead by the Onala boys in Idumota. After the incident, they were warned not to take laws into their hands.

He added: “If truly the policemen were sent by their boss, I expected them to report to the nearest police station or area commander, alerting them that they want to carry out an operation. Unfortunately, they didn't make any formal report to any of the police stations near here. It shows that someone sent them. It was like war on that fateful day. Those who were sleeping in their vehicles were also arrested.

“Some of our friends were chased into the lagoon by the police. The boys were running to evade arrest even though they didn't commit any crime. Some of them were stabbed with scissors in different parts of their bodies while inside the lagoon. Even the two corpses that were brought out of the river had deep cuts on their bodies. That shows that the policemen came with a mission, not only to arrest, but to kill.”

Another youth in the community, Mr. Hafeez Adio, said that the policemen came with a plan. He noted that it was suspicious that the

policemen allowed everyone to be in bed before storming the community at an ungodly hour.

While in the community, our correspondent learnt that on September 1, a boy called Junior was hacked to death by boys from Onala area of Idumota, on a football pitch at Ebute-Ero area. Also, on September 15, another person was killed at the entrance of Elegbata. Adio disclosed that all those killed were from Elegbata, but those of them at Elegbata refused to take laws into their hands. They didn't retaliate.

He said: "Unfortunately, those who were chased into the lagoon were sleeping outside when the policemen came. Immediately they saw the policemen, the boys took off. The policemen, instead of allowing them to go, went after them. The policemen pursued the youth until they jumped into the lagoon and four drowned. Before the policemen came to Elegbata, they had already been to Balogun area to carry out raids. When the policemen got to the Balogun area, they also scaled a fence and got into the compound of a woman. It was after they left Balogun that they came to Elegbata to continue their raid.

"The raid by the police led to the death of our friends. We have been living in fear since then. Some of our colleagues, who escaped the police arrest, have relocated from the community. Those of us who stayed back, stayed because of our goods. If we leave our goods, the police will loot them. The majority of us depended on loan to do our businesses. We want the Lagos State government to call the policemen to order."

Another resident of Elegbata, who identified himself simply as Taofeek, said that even before the latest invasion, the police had always come on a daily basis to extort them.

"I don't know what our offences are," said Taofeek mournfully.

A son of the Oba of the community, Chief Isiaka Olumegbon, said that the police came to raid following a minor clash between two youths from Elegbata and Onala, in the Idumota area of the Island.

He said: "Two persons were killed in Elegbata area and one person was also killed in retaliation by the Elegbata boys. Had it been elders from the two communities had risen to settle the issue, it wouldn't

have escalated to the extent that policemen would invade the community, leading to the death of four boys.

“I was told that it was the Onala boys that first attacked Elegbata boys. It was later that the issue of NURTW came into the matter. The Onala boys also came sometimes in October to rob Alhaja Owoniran of her bag, which contained dollars and phones. In order to fight Elegbata boys, the Onala boys went to Ijora to hire more boys to assist them. Unfortunately, on September 10, one boy was shot to death during masquerade festival. After killing the boy, his assailants smashed his head. It was as a result of the killing that Ofin boys decided to support the Elegbata boys to the fight against the Onala boys. That was how the clash escalated.”

Olumegbon also spoke on the recent invasion of the community by the police.

He said: “The policemen came about 1a.m. on September 9. When they stormed the community, they started shooting sporadically. When I heard the gunshots, I came out to check where the gunshots were coming from. It was then I saw the policemen. I approached them to find out their mission. The policemen were about 20 and had four civilians with them. The civilians were armed with sticks. One of them told me that they came on an operation. After I spoke with the policemen, I left and went inside the palace to sleep.

“It was after I had entered the palace that the policemen picked my sister’s son, Samuel. Immediately I was informed, I came outside, but the policemen had already left. I believe it was after they left the palace that they went to chase the 10 youth that ran into the lagoon.

“The boy that led the policemen into our community is residing on Elegbata before he went to join the Onala boys. Whenever the Onala boys want to talk, they would say the Elegbata boys are dealing in drugs and cocaine. I abhor such a thing in the palace. I don’t want people to discredit the palace because it’s a sacred place.

“The boy that led the policemen to arrest our youths in Elegbata has escaped from the Island. Even his parents also called him on the phone to come and explain what he knows about the incident, he denied partaking in it. On Saturday last week, when the corpses of

the deceased were evacuated from the lagoon, the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) from Lion Building, Bode Ojajuni, was on ground. He promised to get to the root of the matter. What we're demanding is peace on the Island."

The state Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), DSP Bala Elkana, neither picked his calls nor responded to a text message sent to his phone line to confirm the incident.

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