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MINNA

## Bandits sack Niger communities, kidnap villagers

...fleeing woman delivers baby in gunmen's presence

**B**andits numbering about 100 yesterday invaded communities in Shiroro Local Government Area of Niger State and sacked the villagers.

The invasion came a few days after officers of the Joint Security Task Force left their camps at Allawa and Bassa towns in the local government.

This was as a pregnant woman who tried to escape into the bush for safety was delivered of a baby in the presence of the bandits.

The Joint Task Force left the bases on Friday, a day after bandits raided the camps, killed five soldiers and an officer of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC). They also set the camps on fire, after burning the operational vehicles of the task force.

The state government had defended the action of the security operatives, saying it was to enable them to re-strategise for the task ahead.

A witness said about 100 bandits invaded the Allawa area yesterday morning and operated for about 4 hours.

The bandits did not bother to shoot into the air to scare the villagers but went from hut to hut, stealing people's property.



Gunmen

As a result, the villagers ran helter-skelter while the bandits rustled all their animals.

"Nobody was killed by the bandits during the operation, but they went about destroying shops and

houses," another witness said.

The witness added that a pregnant woman, who escaped into the bush for safety, was delivered of a baby.

According to the witness, the

bandits saw her but made sure other women who were abducted assisted her.

"The entire Allawa community is now deserted as the people have all fled to neighbouring Pandogari town where they are currently taking refuge in primary schools and in open spaces, without food and water.

"As I talk to you now, the situation is very pathetic. The whole community is deserted, people have left the town without taking any of their belongings along with them," the witness said.

When contacted on the phone, the Co-Convener of the Shiroro Youth Movement Mr. Abubakar Yussuf Koki, said virtually everyone had left the village since soldiers were withdrawn

from the place.

Governor Abubakar Sani Bello had on Saturday defended the withdrawal of soldiers from the Allawa forests, saying their redeployment was to make them "restrategise".

Bello, who regretted the "deadly attack" and killing of the security agents, in a statement made available to journalists in Minna on Saturday, told the communities "not to be apprehensive but remain calm as the security agents have retreated to re-strategise" and not left them completely.

However, the senator representing Niger East Senatorial Zone in the National Assembly, Alhaji Sani Musa, had pleaded that the action be reconsidered as it would be counter-productive.

Musa said the solution to persistent headache "is not the chopping off of the head", as such the security operatives should reconsider their action in the interest of the poor people.

At press time, neither the police nor government officials could be reached for comments on the latest invasion.