

Ebubeagu: Well-intentioned outfit turned killing machine

- ...leading to the hunter becoming the hunted
- I was tortured, dehumanised, and paraded naked in public -Victim

Ebubeagu, a security outfit, was set up by the South-East Governors' Forum to combat insecurity and protect residents of the region from marauding herders who were carrying out deadly attacks and kidnapping people at random. But, it soon became an outfit of terror, killing and maiming the same people it was established to protect. This prompted calls for its disbandment. In recent times, however, the outfit has become the hunter, which is being hunted as many of its personnel have fallen to the bullets of unknown gunmen across the region, mainly in Ebonyi State, reports

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Ebubeagu, a South-East security outfit, came into being primarily to check the high rate of insecurity in that region. The people clamoured for it. They wanted a semblance of its sister outfit in the South-West codenamed Amotekun. Its main objective was to tame the high calibre criminal elements, especially killer herdsmen in the region.

Initially, this idea could not see the light of the day because the governors of the zone were said not to have shown commitment and sincerity. It, however, took the bravery of Ebonyi and Imo states to separately set up their own, which is today known as Ebubeagu. Abia, Anambra and Enugu states, sensing a backlash from the people, hurriedly set up theirs with different names.

Nevertheless, the activities of Ebubeagu in Ebonyi and Imo states have been marred by controversy and have remained questionable in many ways. There have been widespread allegations that the governments of the two states are using them for political persecution and hunting down real and imagined political opponents, hence the people view their activities with suspicion.

'EBUBEAGU, NOW A NIGHTMARE'

In Ebonyi State, there have been cases of controversial killings allegedly by Ebubeagu. Even some opposition members had once alleged that some powerful individuals unleashed the outfit on them, an allegation the commanders often denied.

But, the outfit has somehow become a lord onto itself, killing and maiming citizens of the states at will. For instance, a 15-year-old was tied to a tree, tortured to near death. A widow and mother of five, including the 15-year-old, Mrs. Nnenna Ogbonna, was one of the victims of Ebubeagu brutality in the state.

She is from Igbeagu, Izzi Local Government Area of the state but resides at Nwankwo Street, Abakaliki with her children. An officer of Ebubeagu lives with them. The operative had asked her daughter, Blessing, to pay for the electricity bill and the girl didn't have the money at that moment and promised to pay within the day. This did not go down well with the Ebubeagu man, who instantly descended on her and beat her up.

He did not stop at that. He also beat up Blessing's mother and thereafter invited his colleagues, who on arrival, handcuffed mother and daughter and

took them to their headquarters at old Government House where Blessing was almost tortured to death but for the Special Assistant to Governor Dave Umahi on Internal Security, Ikechukwu Panchris.

Panchris, who is one of the leaders of the Ebubeagu, heard about the torture and demanded to know the offence the girl and her mother committed that warranted such act. Not satisfied with the explanation, Panchris immediately ordered the untieing of the woman and her daughter and warned the boys against such an act.

Ogbonna narrated her ordeal: "I and my children were sleeping and I woke up to go and ease myself. As I was moving outside to urinate, I saw people with guns entering our compound. One Ebubeagu operative pointed at our house and said 'look at the women's room'."

"When I heard that, I hid myself and started watching from a distance. A few minutes later, they drove out and I decided to come out from my hiding place. I didn't know that some of them were left behind in our compound. Immediately they saw me, they said 'look at this woman, it is like she is the one we are looking for, shoot her, shoot her'. I ran to where a fence was being constructed and hid there.

"I ran to Vanco junction almost naked and met security men on duty and they asked me why I was that way. I explained everything to them and they allowed me to stay there till day break. While I was running away, I saw Blessing my daughter and one of my sons following those Ebubeagu men. I was able to recognise Blessing because she was wearing white clothes while I couldn't recognise my son very well as it was dark. They were torturing Blessing.

"They were torturing Blessing because of where we live, Nwankwo Street at Vanco and we have lived there for five years. Last year, a girl got accommodation in our compound and brought in Ebubeagu operative, and two of them started living together. Every time the Ebubeagu man will be smoking Indian hemp in our kitchen. Each time Blessing is cooking in the kitchen, the man will grab her and hug her. Blessing always complained about this to me and I always tell her that the man smokes a lot and his actions may be

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PHOTO: Politics Nigeria



as a result of what he smokes.

"I then advised Blessing and my second daughter, Favour, not to greet the man anymore. One day, the man complained to me that my children no longer greet him, that they are very stubborn and I didn't talk to him because I knew that he wanted to defile my children.

"Later, he came to Blessing and told her to give him the electricity bill and she told him that she will pay the bill when she returns in the evening. But the man told Blessing that if she moved an inch without giving him the money, he would show her that he is Ebubeagu. My daughter pleaded with him to exercise patience till the evening and he became infuriated and hit her head on the wall.

"He thereafter removed his clothes, carried my daughter and hit her on the ground and laid on her. When I went to separate him from my daughter, he carried me up and hit me on the ground. He started beating two of us and my daughter ran away. He threatened to kill us, boasting that we are not up to the people he has shot dead."

Ogbonna added: "Our landlady, who was not around when the whole thing started, came in and went and brought Ebubeagu operatives, who handcuffed me, Blessing and Daniel, one of my sons. Our landlady ordered the operatives to pick my other little children, saying she is the landlady and

that the Ebubeagu man in our compound is her brother, who saved her when somebody fought her.

"One of them went inside our room and started searching the room and I told him to stop searching our room. His colleagues told me that I don't know what I will pass through in their hands and threatened to kill me and all my children. They took us to their commander at Vanco, who ordered that we should be taken to their headquarters in Government House.

"At the Government House, they started torturing us and one of the Ebubeagu men asked them about our offence. They told him that my daughter, Blessing is very stubborn and tied her to a tree in front of their office as they continued with the torture. One of them hit her with a gun butt on the waist and she fell down. They met Daniel and started torturing him too. I started shouting and one of the operatives, who happened to be their Oga, came out and called one of those that were torturing my children and asked about their offences.

"One of them explained to their Oga that we refused to pay the electricity bill and the Oga called him and those torturing my children fools and ordered that my children be released immediately. They call that their Oga Power. Power came to us and ordered us to go; he said we should go to the police. If not for him, we would have been tortured to death.

"As I was going, a team of policemen from Central Police Station (CPS) landed with a Hilux van and told us that we are under arrest and Blessing told them that she was seriously injured and the policemen ordered her to remove her clothes. They saw the injuries on Blessing's body and arrested that Ebubeagu man living in our compound and detained him. The



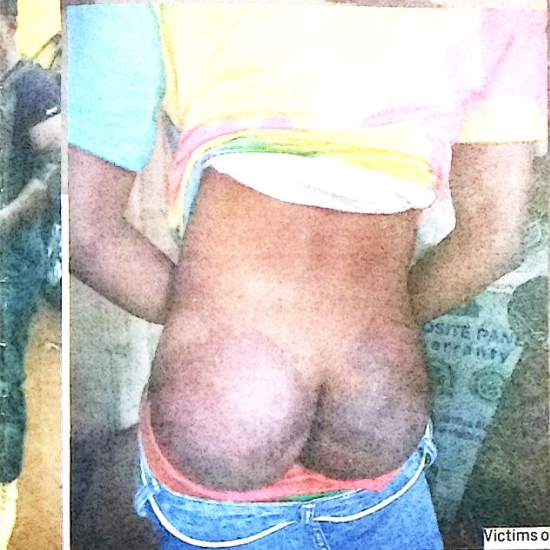
PHOTO: Vanguard



Okorie



Emegha



Victims of torture

policemen directed me to take Blessing to the hospital where she was treated.

"In the evening while I was in the hospital, police started calling me and asked me why I had involved the human right group, FIDA in the matter. I told them that I didn't involve FIDA, that it was the hospital management that invited them into the matter.

Apart from Blessing and her mother, Chief Linus Okorie was equally tortured, dehumanised, and paraded naked in a car park. Okorie alleged that he was tortured, dehumanised, forcefully stripped and paraded stark naked in a public car park while being video recorded.

Okorie, while narrating his ordeal after regaining his freedom, said: "I was tortured, dehumanised, forcefully stripped and paraded stark naked in a public car park while being video recorded. No one was supposed to know my location or come to my rescue. The only accusation leveled at me was that it was an insult to be contesting for the Senate. I was to be declared missing, taken by unknown gunmen.

"Let me be emphatic here; I have forgiven all of them that participated in this gruesome torture and dehumanisation that I went through. If God could save me from an otherwise sure death, who am I not to forgive?

"My journey through abduction, torture, dehumanisation and unjust imprisonment has greatly opened my eyes to the grave injustices suffered by the majority of our people, who have no one to speak for them. I have seen that many are behind bars for offences they know nothing about while some have even been killed and labeled criminals because no one could stand up for them.

"If I gained nothing from the experience, I am strengthened in the resolve to continue to champion the cause of the poor and all disadvantaged classes of the society (the oppressed, the widows, and the orphans). I will continue to be the voice of the voiceless and the defender of the oppressed."

But, Blessing, Ogbonna and Okorie are not alone in this. Chief Julius Ama Orji, popularly known as Oshiri would have been shot dead by suspected Ebubeagu personnel, who attacked him and inflicted severe injuries on two other persons, Samuel Okam and Micheal Orji, who were on his convoy. Orji is a businessman and politician.

The incident occurred at Afikpo South Local Government Area of Ebonyi State when Orji, a native of Nguzu in the area, was returning from a burial ceremony in Ekoli Edda in the local government when his convoy was barricaded.

He said: "Yes my convoy was attacked as I was coming from Senator Ogbuorji's house on a Saturday, via Ekoli Edda, when Stanley Emegha, the State APC chairman and Security Consultant to the State government and his Ebubeagu militia blocked me and started pulling some people from my car. They shot two people and my policemen were very active, so I just managed to escape.

"The two men are still in the hospital receiving treatment. They also shot at one of the cars following me, and two others on the bike. But this time around, I used one of the Prado jeeps I brought down from Lagos, and this is the first time I'm using it so I believe they did not know that I was not in the other car. So, the other policemen was radioing the ones with me to quickly

take me out from the scene. I believe I was their target because they knew it was my convoy.

"I was told that Stanley was insisting that he must embarrass somebody today, calling my name and saying that he has made money to fight me. The only thing I know is that I'm in PDP and they are in APC. I have reported the issue to the police. I even called the commissioner of police myself."

When contacted on the telephone, Emegha asked if the reporter saw the people that were allegedly shot. "Did you see the people, which hospital is that?" he queried.

The state police spokesperson, SP Chris Anyanwu, also said the report was not on his table. "I have not been officially informed. I only got the information when a journalist called to ask me if I was aware of the incident. When told that the victim whose convoy was attacked had called the State Commissioner of Police to inform him, Anyanwu responded: "If he called the Commissioner that means the police are working on it."

THE HUNTER BECOMING THE HUNTED

Soon, following the unexpected behaviours of some of its personnel, Ebubeagu started losing its popularity, as many openly spoke against its repressive tactics. As the people tried to fight back, some unknown gunmen entered the fray and started hunting them down, leading to the security network losing its operatives in droves.

No fewer than 40 of the operatives have been killed by gunmen across Ebonyi State in recent times. But the

outfit has refused to make public the total number of its men that have been killed by the gunmen apparently to prevent those still in service and who are already afraid following the killings of the operatives from resigning.

The state Commandant of the security network, Friday Nnanna Ujor, told Saturday Telegraph that although some operatives of Ebubeagu may contemplate quitting the job, resigning from the service was not the best option as they will be more exposed to danger. Their enemies, he said, could easily kill them because they are no longer protected.

He said: "Some operatives may like to resign but from the orientation we have given to them, you don't go back because as security personnel, immediately you have to come out and start the job, if you go back, that's when you will get more enemies because those people that are after you will now know that you no longer have the security power and they will come after you."

According to Ujor, though the reasons for killing the personnel remain unknown, it may not be unconnected with their mode of operation.

Magnus Iganda, one of the commanders of the security outfit, was killed a few months ago by gunmen, who stormed his house on a bike in the morning in Ezza North Local Government Area of the state. The gunmen killed Iganda unchallenged and the incident caused fear among the residents of the area.

Also in Mkpuma-Ekwa-Oku, Ebonyi Local Government Area of the state, another operative of Ebubeagu, Sunday Izhikpa, was killed in his duty post. The gunmen were not also challenged during the killing. The same thing happened in Igweledoha, Amagu, Ikwo Local Government Area of the state, where another Ebubeagu man, Ifeanyi Orogbo, was murdered and partially burnt by his attackers.

The incident which occurred at night, took place at a drinking joint owned by the victim in the community. The deceased is said to be one of the commanders of the security outfit. Another was killed and his head cut off by his assailants. Joseph Nwanja was also killed in November by gunmen in Okposi community, Ohaozara Local Government Area. The gunmen came through Ugwulangwu axis and killed Nwanja unchallenged.

ESTABLISHMENT OF EBUBEAGU

Insecurity was very high in South-East to the level that the people of the region were living in fear and were sleeping with their two eyes opened owing to killings, kidnapping, raping, armed robbery, maiming and destructions of means of livelihood by gunmen, hoodlums and herdsmen.

This prompted the South-East governors, who met in Enugu and agreed that a joint security network must be formed to complement the efforts of security agents in the zone to tackle the menace.

The name the security network will bear and logistics required for the security network became an issue and the security network could not be formed immediately. Six months later, the Governors took a stand and named the security network Ebubeagu.

However, it was only Ebonyi State that took the issue seriously and established the security network. The state Assembly didn't waste time by approving the security network, which was promptly signed into law by Governor Dave Umahi. Thus, Ebubeagu became operational in the state and the people heaved a sigh of relief as the operatives swung into action and returned normalcy to the state in collaboration with other security agents, who were hitherto overwhelmed by the insecurity in the land.

But, since the establishment of Ebubeagu, the outfit has been in the news mostly for the wrong reasons. The operatives are often accused of one atrocity or the other, including killings, and maiming of citizens they were meant to protect.