



LT COL AH ALI PSS psc MNIM CM
COMMANDING OFFICER
181 AMPHIBIOUS BATTALION
NIGERIAN ARMY



Maj SD Shafa (NI/13976)



Maj DE Obi (NI/14395)



Capt U Zakari (NI/16348)



93NA/36/2974 SSgt Yahaya Saidu



10NA/65/7274 Cpl Yahaya Danbaba



11NA/66/9853 Cpl Kabiru Bashir



16NA/75/5844 LCpl Bulus Haruna



17NA/76/0719 LCpl Sole Opeyemi



17NA/76/290 LCpl Bello Anas



19NA/78/2655 LCpl Hamman Peter



18NA/77/1191 LCpl Ibrahim Abdullahi



17NA/76/6079 Pte Alhaji Isah



19NA/78/0911 Pte Clement Francis



19NA/78/2162 Pte Abubakar Ali



19NA/78/6079 Pte Ibrahim Adamu



21NA/80/4795 Pte Adamu Ibrahim

17 Soldiers: When peace took flight from Okuama Community

As Nigerians come to terms with last week's murder in Delta State of 17 soldiers, including four officers, **DOMNIC ADEWOLE** and **GABRIEL CHOBA** chronicle the horrendous incident and consequent reprisal by the military

Gabriel Choba and Dominic Adewole

Twists and counter twists have continued to trail the bloody clash between soldiers and irate youths in Okuama community in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State. The clash had resulted in a devastating retaliation by men of the 181 Amphibious Battalion of the Nigerian Army, Bomadi, LGA.

It was gathered that after the killing of some soldiers during the fracas, military troops from the Nigerian Army's Joint Task Force, 6 Division, stormed Okuama community and launched a violent attack, shelling and bombing houses.

It was gathered that the soldiers were apparently out in retaliation for the ambush and killing of their colleagues, who were on a peace mission, following a communal clash between Okuama and Okoloba communities.

However, in fear of reprisal attacks from military forces, numerous residents had fled their homes, seeking refuge elsewhere.

Amidst the chaos, military troops have intensified the manhunt for those responsible for the deadly attack on the military personnel.

The troops of the Nigerian Army were said

to have as of Sunday conducted heavy military combing of neighbouring communities.

The situation has caused fear and panic among the residents of Okuama community, who fled to neighbouring Ughelli for safety, anticipating possible reprisals from the soldiers.

The incident, which broke out on Thursday, March 14, 2024, has continued to spark controversy and conflicting reactions following the massacre of soldiers and recovery of their floating bodies in the River.

Okuama denies killing of soldiers

However, some Okuama residents have come forward to deny the killing of soldiers, alleging that the attackers were mercenaries working for a private security company.

They claimed that the mercenaries, dressed in Army uniforms, invaded the community, resulting in the loss of many lives and the destruction of homes.

The indigenes alleged serious conspiracy against the military by elements who want to pin the crime on Okuama, insisting that they were fishermen and potato farmers and could not have had the kind of guns to fight, talk less to kill 17 Army officers.

An indigene of Okuama community, who simply gave his name as Onajite Idiaphoro, in an interview with newsmen, said: "We were holding our regular Community meeting on Thursday when some men in Army uniforms, carried by on a gunboat used by this private security company invaded the meeting demanding to see our community chairman.

"As soon as our chairman was identified, the men said that they were taking him to Bomadi for questioning but the community women resisted the approach because Okuama is under Ughelli South Local Government Area and the chairman did not commit any crime neither the community that demanded military invasion.

"The men started shooting, killing two persons instantly and injuring many persons before driving away."

Idiaphoro said that after the first shooting, residents of the community, especially the men, started moving out, fearing that the worst could happen later.

"Four hours later, the men came back with many gunboats, shooting sporadically into the community and killing many persons, including women and children before burning houses," he lamented.

"How can our people, who are mere fishermen and potato farmers have guns to fight, talk less of killing a whole 17 Army officers as wrongly reported? He queried in a emotion laden voice.

Continuing, Idiaphoro bursted into tears saying, "Okuama community has been at the receiving end of the crisis with Okoloba, accusing a former NIMASA boss of being responsible for the onslaught.

He, however, called on President Bola Tinubu, Governor Sheriff Oborevwori, and the Chief of Army Staff to immediately halt the invasion of their community and set up a panel of inquiry to unravel the true killers of the reported soldiers.

Ijaw community turns into a ghost town

It was also gathered that Okuama, an Ijaw community in Bomadi Local Government Area of Delta State, has turned into a ghost town in the aftermath of the massacre of soldiers dispatched to the area on a peace mission.

The Defence Headquarters confirmed the killings, with the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General C.G. Musa, ordering the immediate arrest and investigation of all those involved.

Similarly seized by tension on account of the killing are neighbouring towns in Urhobo and Ijaw communities in Ughelli South and Bomadi Local Government Areas

of the state.

Residents of the neighbouring communities said military aircraft were hovering over them, ostensibly on reconnaissance missions. This sparked fear that military invasions and operations in the area were imminent.

The soldiers were allegedly ambushed and murdered by youths on Thursday when the troops went to quell violence between the people of Okuama and Okoloba.

Although no group has claimed responsibility for the dastardly attack, there are beliefs that some militia groups masterminded the attack on the troops of the 181 Amphibious Battalion of the Army.

Various sources said the soldiers went to Okuama to secure the release of one Mr Anthony Aboh, an indigene of Okoloba, who was abducted over the lingering land dispute between the two communities.

The military men were reportedly caught in an ambush on their way back to their base after their meeting with leaders of Okuama community ended in a deadlock.

A source said: "We were coming back to our boats after the unfruitful discussion to release the kidnapped victim of Okoloba community.

"Suddenly, there were rains of bullets coming from all directions and some of us managed to escape.

"Many people were killed during the ambush, including a former honourable member from Okoloba community, who reported the matter to the JTF. But the commander and other officers were held hostage and taken to an unknown destination towards the creek opposite the community."

Sources said the lifeless body of the kidnapped Anthony Aboh had been recovered floating on River Forcados.

One of the sources in Okoloba said: "We found the lifeless body of Mr Anthony Aboh

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floating on River Forcados near Ayakoromo community, and like other victims, he was blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back."

Lawmaker Mutu condemns act

A member of the House of Representatives, Nicholas Mutu, representing Bomadi/Patani Federal Constituency of Delta State, in his reaction, condemned the killings and called for a thorough investigation to bring the culprits to justice.

Mutu dispelled rumours linking the Ijaw community to the crime, emphasizing that the indigenes of Okuama were responsible for the heinous act.

He, however, disclosed that two contingent of troops of Nigerian Army were actually deployed separately on the purported peace keeping mission in Okuama.

Although he failed to disclose who authorized the deployment of troops of such caliber of officers to quell a communal crisis, Mutu hinted that the troop were deployed to investigate the killing of an Okoloba boy but were ambushed and wilfully murdered in cold-blood in Okuama.

In a statement he released, Mutu, who is the Chairman of the House Committee on Gas, described the killing of 17 soldiers by some irate youths suspected to be from Okuama community, an Urhobo enclave in Ughelli South Local Government Area of the state as "barbaric and inhuman."

Mutu, who is also the Chairman of the Southern Nigeria Caucus in the House of Representatives, said the killings of the soldiers, including a Lt. Col, 2 Majors and one Captain of the Nigerian Army, on a peace keeping assignment in the Urhobo community was "senseless and embarrassing."

Mutu challenged all relevant security agencies to work round the clock to fish out the killers and bring them to justice.

He warned that the suspected attackers should not escape justice in order to serve as deterrent to those who may be planning to indulge in such heinous crime in the future.

The lawmaker frowned at purported distortion of facts of the incident in a section of the media, which linked the fate of the soldiers to Ijaw militias in Okoloba, an Ijaw community in Bomadi Local Government Area of Delta State.

"This is far from truth of the incident. The Ijaw is not in anyway linked or connected to this unjustifiable barbaric and inhuman and condemnable act.

"The facts of the matter are with all appropriate security agencies and they are in fact, in public domain. The indigenes of Okuama are responsible for these senseless killings. Two contingent of troops of Nigerian Army who were deployed separately on peace keeping mission in Okuama, particularly to investigate the killing of an Okoloba boy, were ambushed and wilfully murdered in cold-blood in Okuama.

"Their headless and dismembered remains were recovered in the waters of Okuama Community, which is the scene of the crime.

"It's therefore callous and indiscretionary to link the Ijaw to this heinous crime, which is a national embarrassment. It's wrong for a section of the press to link the innocent Ijaw people to this crime and I seize this medium to debunk such irresponsible reports on the incident."

Calls for independent investigation

Reacting to the onslaught, the Urhobo Media Practitioners Advocacy Group (UMPAG), expressed shock and condemned the killing of the military personnel and some indigenes of Okuama community.

The group, which raised several posers over the incident, called for an independent investigation and urged the Delta State Government and the Nigerian Army to establish a joint panel of inquiry to uncover the truth behind the incident.

The group said that as a body of trained media workers, "we condemn in strong



Musa

terms the killing of the military personnel and some indigenes of the Okuama community."

According to the group, "from information available to us, there is a grand conspiracy to twist the facts of the bizarre incident to paint one party as savages and adjudge another as saints."

The group noted that from its findings, the incident came on the heels of the renewed crisis over a land dispute between Okuama community in Ughelli South and Okoloba community in Bomadi Local Government Areas of the state.

UMPAG, in a statement signed by Mr. Onojeghen Theophilus Okpare, its Secretary and Mr. Shedrack Onitsha, Executive Member, maintained that the Urhobos of Okuama community in Ewu Kingdom have lived peacefully with their Okoloba neighbours for ages, saying that "both communities have robust inter-marriages and can even speak both Urhobo and Ijaw languages fluently."

The statement reads: "We have also been informed that leading from the killings of the personnel, Okuama community has been completely razed by angry soldiers. The situation has sapped peace and law abiding citizens of Okuama community, especially when it has not been established that Okuama youths were responsible for this gruesome killing of the military men. This, too, we strongly condemn in strong terms.

"While we commiserate with the Nigerian military, the Federal Government and the Delta State Government on the unwarranted killing of these personnel, we join other Nigerians to demand for an independent investigation and arrest of the culprits.

"To this end, we call on the Delta State Government and the Nigerian Army to urgently constitute a joint panel of enquiry to unravel the cause and what led to the killing of the soldiers on the said peace mission to Okuama and Okoloba communities."

The group raised some posers, which included: Was the Ovie (King) of Ewu Kingdom and her subjects informed of the military visit on a peace mission? Was the Executive Governor of Delta State, Rt. Hon. Sheriff Oborevwori, informed of the peace mission? Why did the situation report come from DPO Bomadi, and not DPO, Otu-Jeremi?

Why would the military, stationed in Bomadi, embark on a "PEACE" mission to Okuama in Ughelli South, without the involvement of DPO Jeremi, and local government officials?

Why was the military "PEACE" mission escorted by Ijaw youths? How come, that civilian members of the "PEACE" mission survived to tell the story, yet no military man survived?

Recall that Tukur Gusau, the director of information at the Defence Headquarters, had disclosed in a statement on Saturday that the fallen personnel included a Lieutenant Colonel, two Majors, one Captain, and 12 soldiers. They were ambushed and killed by



Lagbaja

local youths on Thursday while responding to a distress call arising from a communal crisis between the Okuama and Okoloba communities.

How Okoloba, Okuama signed peace accord before brutal killing of Soldiers

Our Correspondent's investigation revealed that leaders from Okoloba and Okuama communities had signed a peace accord weeks before some youths ambushed and killed 17 officers and men of the 181 Amphibious Battalion of the Nigerian Army.

While it is yet to be confirmed those who carried out the dastardly act, those killed, the Commanding Officer (CO), two Majors, one Captain and 13 soldiers, were said to be on a peace mission to Okuama when they were ambushed and killed.

The peace accord, it was gathered, was brokered by the Special Adviser to Delta Governor Sheriff Oborevwori on Peace Building and Conflict Resolution, Chief Edwin Uzor.

The peace accord followed the crisis, which recently erupted between both riverine communities over boundary issues.

Uzor said during the signing of the peace accord that the administration of Oborevwori would not tolerate leaders who are brewing crises in their domains.

While signing the peace accord, Uzor charged leaders of the communities to avoid making comments capable of hitting up the polity, stressing that leaders who are brewing crises in their domains would be made to face the consequences of their actions.

The Governor's SA observed that both communities had been living together in harmony and urged them to continue to keep the peaceful relationship they have enjoyed over time.

Uzor also encouraged the people to maintain laid down principles guiding them in the past, emphasising that dialogue remained the proper way of resolving the issue.

On the issue of the boundary dispute, Uzor urged the communities to maintain the consensus earlier established by the traditional ruler of Akugbene Mein Kingdom and avoid creating unnecessary tension in the area.

He warned that any community leader going against set down rules and regulations will be prosecuted by security agents.

On the alleged killing of some residents of Okuama community, the Special Adviser urged the people to remain calm, adding that security agencies will investigate the issue and bring anyone found wanting to book.

"On the issue of the matter, the police have taken a very strategic step which is the function of police. You know the matter is now in two ways: the criminal aspect and the peace resolution aspect.

"The criminal aspect is being handled by the police, guarding everywhere. We should live within the limit of the law. We should not be doing things that will be escalating problems in the community," Uzor said.

Present during signing of the peace ac-

cord were the members representing

Bomadi constituency in the State House of Assembly, Boyo Preyor and his counterpart in Ughelli South, Festus Utuama.

Others present during signing of the peace accord were the Chairmen of both local government areas, representatives of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and representatives from both communities.

Weeks after the peace pact was signed, a Commanding Officer (CO), two Majors, one Captain and 13 soldiers, were ambushed and killed.

The officers include, Lt. Col. A.H. Ali (CO, 181 Amphibious Battalion) Maj S.D. Shafa (N/13976); Maj D.E. Obi (N/14395) and Capt U. Zakari (N/16348). The soldiers are, SSgt Yahaya Saidu (#3NA/36/2974); Cpl Yahaya Danbaba (1ONA/65/7274); Cpl Kabiru Bashir (11NA/66/9853); LCpl Bulus Haruna (16NA/TS/5844); LCpl Sola Opeyemi (17NA/760719); LCpl Bello Anas (17NA/76/290); LCpl Hamman Peter (NA/T82653); LCpl Ibrahim Abdullahi (18NA/77/1191); Pte Alhaji Isah (17NA/76/6079); Pte Clement Francis (19NA/78/0911); Pte Abubakar Ali (19NA/78/2162); Pte Ibrahim Adamu (19NA/78/6079) and Pte Adamu Ibrahim (21NA/80/4795).

How they were murdered

During an interview with the President of the Ijaw National Congress, Benjamin Okaba, in one of the electronic media, he made explicitly clear that the fallen heroes were ambushed.

He recalled that some soldiers went to Okuama community for a peace negotiation, only to be killed by unknown people.

According to him, the soldiers, were in Okuama community in Delta State for peace talks. They were returning to their speedboats when they were suddenly waylaid by bullets from different angles.

He said, "Information filtered from the town hall to some youths that military had come to attack their people and kill their people. So, those aggrieved youths went to the waterside and ambushed them (the military personnel). The soldiers were just walking back to the speedboats to get back to where they actually came from, only to have rain of bullets from all sides.

"In fact, the scenario is not what anyone would want to describe. After killing them, those they beheaded, dismembered, and dissected was done because they maybe believed that after taking some parts of somebody's body, the body was not going to float up."

Governor angry, warns monarchs:

Governor Oborevwori has condemned, the unprovoked killing of officers and soldiers.

The Governor described the killings as not only "despicable" but not in sync with the culture and tradition of the people of the state and vowed to fish out those involved in the heinous act.

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successive administrations in the state had championed and promoted, even as enshrined in his four prong M.O.R.E Agenda of peace and security.

The Governor, who officially spoke through his Chief Press Secretary, Sir Festus Ahon, in Asaba, said the government and well-meaning people of state were gravely disturbed by the violence.

He said since the state is governed within the tenets of the rule of law and human decency, such crime would not be tolerated or go unpunished. He said: "The State Government shall take all measures necessary to fish out all those behind this dastardly act and ensure they are made to face the full wrath of the law."

"This is alien to the culture of peace and security in Delta State. This incident is despicable and not in sync with the culture and tradition of Deltans."

He urged all citizens and residents of the state to remain law-abiding while necessary measures were being taken to protect lives and property.

Ijaw disown Okuama

The President of the Ijaw Publishers' Forum (IPF), Comrade Ozobo Austin and the Secretary-General, Mr Tare Magbei, have jointly

disowned Okuama community.

In their joint statement, they said Okuama is an Urhobo speaking community in Ughelli South and not in Ijaw area of Bomadi Local Government.

"This is a fact that the military on ground is aware of. But twisting facts by some respected newspaper is not only disappointing. It is a connivance with certain characters to malign Ijaw nation. This is a misplacement of fact."

Operation Delta Safe predicts 'measured responses'

The Joint Security Task Force for Niger Delta, has vowed that there would be measured responses from the military and injurious consequences for the perpetrators of the dastardly act of killing troops on a peace mission in Okuama, Delta State.

However, the squad said the provisions of the military act would temper the armed forces, guaranteeing that they would be led by the rule of law rather than emotions, as they are a disciplined force that adheres to laws of armed conflict, rules of engagement and respect for human rights.

"It is no longer news that troops of Operation Delta Safe suffered a setback that

resulted in loss of lives of gallant personnel of the armed forces.

"These personnel were on a peace mission to Okuama Community of Delta State when members of the community launched unprovoked attacks on the unsuspecting troops, killing the Commanding Officer of 181 Amphibious Battalion, 2 Majors, 1 Capt, and 12 personnel of the battalion."

Okuama, Okoloba age-long enmity

Although, the two are neighbouring communities, they have been on each other's throat for decades over land dispute.

Also shocking but true, Okuama in Ughelli and Okoloba in Bomadi, were known brothers and sisters of neighbouring towns but they will not allow peace to reign supreme.

Army refutes reprisal story

The Director, Defence Media Operations, Major Gen. Edward Buba, debunked the news of reprisal attack on Okuama community over the killings.

He said: "It is against this background that the military debunks all claims that the military embarked on reprisal attacks in Okuama Community after the incident."

"The community was de-

serted even before troops arrived at the scene. Importantly, those involved in peddling this misinformation, disinformation, and fake news that the military had embarked on reprisal attacks on the community following the incident, should desist from further dishonouring our fallen heroes."

But the soldiers were said to have traced the hideouts of militant leader behind heinous act, and that they swooped on some Bayelsa and Bomadi communities, set some creeks hideouts ablaze and arrested Akugbene community chairman.

Gen Buba said: "It is necessary to reiterate that both the Constitution and the Armed Forces Act saddled the military with the responsibility of the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity of our nation."

"Accordingly, the armed forces consist of citizens from every nook and cranny of the nation, that have taken an oath of allegiance to put themselves in harm's way to defend our great country."

"Given the ongoing security situation across the country, troops are deployed on internal security operations in about all the states of the federation. Troops intervene to de-escalate and contain

tensed situations.

"However, the ugly incident in Okuama Community in Delta State is indicative of the dangers our gallant troops experience in order to secure our nation."

"The military assures Nigerians that there will be measured responses and injurious consequences for the perpetrators of these dastardly acts."

Police cry out, score military low

The Commissioner of Police in Delta State, has raised the alarm that he needs a permit card (clearance) to access Okuama, even as a member of the state's Security Council, because troops have taken over the community. Also, he blamed the military for embarking on a solo peace mission without involving other sister security agencies in the state.

The dragnet for perpetrators

Gen. Edward Buba said, "It behooves on the community leaders, elders, and even the people of Delta State to assist in the investigation to identify the perpetrators of the dastardly act, so that they can be held accountable for their actions."

"Furthermore, it must be noted that the dispute between Okuama and Okolo-

ba communities remains unresolved. It therefore implies that there could be untoward activities not initiated by the military."

"Overall, there is no doubt, that this is an extremely sad development and untoward activity by members of the Okuama community against troops that were there to protect them."

Buba warned the public to resist the temptation of allowing any videos of the incident of the killed personnel to go viral.

According to him, their loved ones are still alive, even though they have died protecting our country and its citizens.

"It would be a dishonour to the fallen heroes to allow such ugly videos of their demise to go viral. Above all, as the military mourns, it remains ever determined to ensure the safety and security of citizens across the country."

The silent reprisal

Fresh troops were said to have besieged the riverine Igbomoturu community in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area, Bayelsa State, where they killed some youths, who resisted their incursion, and razed some houses belonging to militants.