

Ezioha: Playground of terror gangs

Ezioha is a community in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State. A mere 15-minute drive to Owerri, the state capital, the community is harbouring a gang of gunmen, who terrorise both the community and others as far as the state capital. In this report, STEVE UZOECHI in Owerri, gives accounts of the sufferings of the people of the area and their expectation that security agencies would intervene and rid the community of the unwanted guests

Obiefula Emesibe (not real name) is a young adult and an indigene of Ezioha in the Mbaitoli Council Area of Imo State. Around two months ago, he had a misunderstanding with his brother over a television set and his brother reported him to the group of gunmen, who have now become the only governing authority in Ezioha.

Some call them "Umuoma" while others popularly call them "Unknown Gunmen". The brother alleged that Obiefuna took away his television set.

The 'authorities' summoned Obiefuna and in the course of 'adjudicating' the matter, they beat him until he dropped dead. When they realised he was dead, they simply called his brother who reported the case to come and carry his brother's corpse. Case closed!

The case of Obiefuna is just one of the many grueling and cruel occurrences in Ezioha community since strange men bearing arms and fetish charms invaded the community and under the guise of Biafra self-determination struggle, took the people captive while unleashing the worst kind of subjugation, intimidation and dehumanizing terror on the people of Ezioha.

Presently, fear and unspoken terror pervade Ezioha community as most of the voices calling for help are calling from outside Ezioha, particularly those who had fled the community to other safe zones.

Haven for Bandits

Following the destruction of many camps and hideouts of terror gangs in Imo State by security forces, many of the dislodged and fleeing gunmen, have found their way to Ezioha, which is fast becoming a safe haven for bandits from across the South-East.

The criminal camp in Ezioha is fast growing in size, structure and sophistication.

Findings indicated that the Ezioha terror camp had been there for almost two years while carefully keeping under the radar, but has received a major boost with the sudden influx of gunmen from Orsu, Agwa, Okigwe, Orlu and even Ebonyi and Anambra states, thereby strengthening their fighting capability and consequently causing an upsurge the spate of armed robbery, kidnapping, arbitrary killings and all manner of violent crimes around the area.

Firm Control

With the use of intimidation, fear and fetish manipulations, the hoodlums in Ezioha somehow wield firm control over the people and their community.

In Ezioha today, these gunmen constitute the law, jury and judge in the community — they are the only ruling authority.

Under their watch, nobody dares report any matter to the Police, or take any dispute to court. They adjudicate over land matters, debt matters, family feuds and any other dispute they may fancy. Their judgment is final and cannot be appealed. The willful violation of their pronouncements or judgment may lead to summary execution.

It is no longer news that these gunmen engage in ritual practices, with many alleging incidents of human sacrifices; and often times, it is their practice to plant their fetish shrines all over the place and use the instrument of fear to further subjugate the people.

For instance, a certain source and indigene of the community, who had earlier wanted to air his opinion on the horrible situation in Ezioha, suddenly backed out at the last



One of the attacked vehicles

minute, declining to talk on the excuse that the gunmen were diabolic and would find him out.

He had said: "No, I cannot continue with this. If I say anything here, they may kill my kinsmen and burn our houses. They practice witchcraft and voodoo, and will use that to detect who spoke and what I said."

That is how bad it has become.

Deserted Community

Not a few indigenes and residents of Ezioha have fled the community for safety. So many others who live outside the community, no longer bother to come home. Schools, Churches and markets have all shut down as people continue to leave the community in droves.

Social activities have been grounded to a halt and if for any reason, anybody has the courage to conduct the burial of a loved one in the community, they will only be able to do that with the approval of these gunmen and after a prescribed fee has been paid.

Due to the activities of these hoodlums, Nkwo Ezioha Market (Popularly known as Nkwo Otura) has been abandoned; their only Primary School is shut down, with other small churches in the community deserted except for the Catholic Church in Ezioha where one hardly sees anybody on Sunday.

"Sometimes you see just one vehicle. Other times, you see a solitary ambulance parked within the church premises on a Sunday morning.

"As at February, during the campaigns for

House of Assembly election, no campaign train ventured into the community and not one political poster was pasted anywhere in the community as such things were abolished by the gunmen", said a community source.

The fear of these gunmen remains palpable in Ezioha and its environs.

Those who remain in the community, are largely treated like captives to the extent that whenever they are crossing the checkpoints mounted by these hoodlums in their community, they are made to pay a certain fee before they are allowed to pass.

Unchallenged and emboldened

Apparently emboldened by their unchallenged onslaught on the people of Ezioha, Umuoma, Ukwukwu, Awomamma, Umuaka and other neighbouring communities, these gunmen have continued to wreak havoc on many communities in Mbaitoli, Njaba and Owerri Metropolis with a string of assassination, abduction, kidnapping and other violent crimes.

This band of gunmen are no longer hiding away in their forest camp, but have continued to inflict pain beyond their hideout in Ezioha and even into the very heart of Owerri, the state capital of Imo State.

Within the last two months, they abducted a family heading to Owerri from Ihite Uboma. They threw the father out of the vehicle and whisked the wife and a six-month old baby away. They took them all the way to their camp at Ezioha. They did not release

the mother and child until ransom was paid in full.

A similar fate befell a petrol filling station owner, who they abducted at the Orji area of Owerri. They also bundled him into their vehicle and ferried him all the way to their camp of horror at Ezioha.

They forced him to empty his bank accounts using his banks' mobile apps, while he was still in captivity. They released him when they were satisfied they had drained him of all his funds.

On the 9th of June, they abducted a Moscow-returnee near the Spibat-Amakohia junction. His feeble attempt to resist abduction resulted in very brutal beating reducing his face to a bloody mess. They overpowered and bundled him into their vehicle and headed straight to Ezioha. The hoodlums held him for more than two weeks more, after ransom had been paid, even as they wrecked his cryptocurrency wallet, liquidating his Bitcoin asset.

Just recently, on the 7th of July, the hoodlums ambushed and killed three vigilante operatives in Umuaka, a teenage girl who was killed by a stray bullet, with one other, in a critical condition in the hospital.

Less than three days after the killing of the Umuaka vigilante boys, they struck again at Orodu in Mbaitoli, abducting another victim while distraught villagers shouted for help to no avail. Their operational vehicle was sighted as they made good their escape, with other tell-tale signs of their operations con-

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firming they have become more daring and brazen in their reign of terror.

It would be recalled that, Sunday Telegraph raised the alarm a month ago about the deadly activities of this terror gang and observed that no fewer than 10 persons, at the time, had been abducted from Umuaka community in a space of one month, by this same criminal gang. Among these victims were a Policeman and a Vigilante operative, with neither a ransom demand made nor the body of the victims seen till date.

Economic Loss

Nkwo Ezioha (Nkwo Otura) was the major market in that vast locality, with traders coming from Mbaitoli, Owerri West, Njaba LGA and beyond, to do business in the market, before the market was abandoned and deserted due to the live-threatening activities of the hoodlums.

The riverside, where the gunmen sited their camp and hideout has caused indigenes to keep away from the river for fear of their lives. Before now, Ezioha was popular for the production of Tapioca (Abacha) which they washed and processed at the river, and thereafter sold at the Nkwo Ezioha market.

Breadfruit is also an exotic food that fetch high dividend from market sales for indigenes of Ezioha but with the invasion of the community, villagers no longer go to the river to wash and process their Breadfruits for sales. All of these highlight a very negative impact on few of the business lines that sustain rural families.

Topography of crime

Ezioha community is separated from Awomamma community in Oru West by the Njaba River. And the rough and steep topography leading to their riverside forest camp is apparently what made Ezioha a choice location of a hideout for the terror gang.

It is a tough and tricky terrain for automobiles. Even armoured vehicles would need tact to navigate the paths which makes it rather very difficult for any surprise ground attack on the criminal camp to succeed without special adjustments and adaptations.

Reliable sources who spoke to our correspondent averred that the base camp of the terror gang is located about 3kilometres to 4kilometres below ground level, in a steep drop leading directly to the forest by the River Njaba bordering Ezioha and Awomamma.

To further make access to the camp difficult, the hoodlums, our correspondent gathered, had dug deep ditches blocking the narrow pass to the camp, thereby making it nearly impossible for any vehicle, even armoured vehicle to easily sweep into the riverside and raid their camp.

Beyond restricting accessibility, the Njaba River makes escape from attack easier for the gang. There are three easy points of exit, according to locals, through which the hoodlums can easily escape and swim across to the neighbouring Awomamma in no time at all. In like manner also, another villager maintained that there are also about three ground paths through which they can flee into neighbouring communities and mix up with locals when under attack.

Operational Modalities

These gunmen at Ezioha, now said to be numbering well over 150 in their camp could choose a vehicle from any of their more than six different vehicles, for any operation.

The teams that venture into Owerri are different from teams that operate in the base camp. The teams that come to the state capital, are mainly for the purposes of abduction and kidnapping. They dress in black like many of the special operations security forces in the state, armed with AK-47 assault rifles and clutching walkie-talkies, which give them a look of legitimacy.

According to multiple dependable sources, the hoodlums make good use of their walkie-talkies. It is not just for cover.



Aboki

A source, who craved anonymity, told our correspondent: "On approaching the camp at Ezioha forest by the River Njaba, the incoming vehicle conveying a kidnap victim will radio those at their checkpoints to lift the barricades. In the same way, when they get to where the ditches and trenches were dug, they will also use the walkie-talkie to radio those at that point.

"What happens when they approach one of those ditches is that, the men on ground will carry two heavy logs of wood and place them on the ditch, so that the incoming vehicles will pass. Immediately they pass

through, the logs of wood are removed. This routine happens at three strategic points while approaching the camp, where counter-attack ditches are dug."

Save-Our-Soul

A community leader in one of the neighbouring communities to Ezioha, who had survived the onslaught, said that the evil being perpetrated by the criminal gang against the communities are 'unspeakable'.

"What grieves my heart is that the government has continued to carry on as if nothing is happening here. This is not Orsu, Agwa or

Okiawe, this is Mbaitoli in Owerri, 15-minute drive to the state capital and the government is behaving as if all is well.

"My people are not interested in the 'Imo is safe' politics. All we want is a secure homeland, so that our people can live in peace. All the gains made in the fight against insecurity seems to be rolling back against my people. I do not care if the governor is in the state or Abuja. He knows what he did in Orsu and Orlu. He should also do the same in Ezioha, so our people can come home again.

"You heard what happened in Umuaka? That is a child's play compared to what happens in some of the communities closer to Ezioha than Umuaka. I read that 10 persons have been abducted in Umuaka. Then, imagine how many people that have been whisked away from nearer communities.

"Why this axis is still habitable is because of the Umuaka Police Division, which has defied all assaults against it by these hoodlums. That Division is the only line of defence we have in this entire axis of evil; but the work is gradually becoming overwhelming and there is need for an urgent inter-agency intervention in this matter."

He added that there is a palpable fear that the criminals may still be plotting an attack on the Umuaka Police Division.

He said: "Umuaka Division is among the few Police Divisions that defied the previous efforts of these terror gangs to burn and loot its armoury. This Division has been attacked more than twice by these terrorists, who always suffer serious casualties in the hands of the gallant operatives at the Division.

"Now, they have brought their camp closer to our community and their number is increasing everyday as other dislodged hoodlums join them from other parts of the region. We are worried that the Division may now be their major target."

While noting that many locals in the neighbouring communities are still fleeing their communities, he called on the Imo State government and all relevant security agencies to urgently intervene before the hoodlums overrun all the communities around Ezioha.

How manufacturers can gain access to African markets, say MAN, others

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"Some of the companies include, Le Look Nigeria Limited, exporting bags to Kenya, representing all the female entrepreneurs, Secure ID Limited, exporting smart cards to Cameroon, Dangote, exporting clinkers to Cameroon," he stated.

Minister of Industry, Trade, and Investment, Doris Uzoka-Anite, reiterated Nigeria's commitment to development and the immense promise AfCFTA holds for industrialisation. She called on all stakeholders to join hands in ensuring AfCFTA delivers for the people, leveraging the platform to harness the available opportunities.

"We must all join hands to ensure that AfCFTA delivers for the people," she said.

She said AfCFTA, which leverages the immense resource endowments of the continent, aims to deepen industrialisation, create opportunities for engaging the youthful population, and facilitate more inclusive economic growth.

She noted that the agreement is seen as the most sustainable path to prosperity, requiring Nigeria and other African countries to export their way out of poverty, unemployment, and economic depression.

Meanwhile, the Head of the National AfCFTA Coordination Office, Olusegun Awolowo, disclosed on Tuesday, in Lagos at the implementation of the AfCFTA Nigeria's inaugural shipment under the GTI framework and ribbon-cutting ceremony that the 10 companies will be exporting their products across Africa.

"The companies are 10 in number, and

over the next few days, weeks, and months, they will be exporting Nigerian products to five countries across East, Central, and North Africa," Awolowo said.

According to him, these companies, which would be exporting products like bags and drinks are setting a new standard for others to follow.

He stated that these companies embodied the resilience, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit that define Nigeria.

"Some of the companies include, Le Look Nigeria Limited, exporting bags to Kenya; Secure ID Limited, exporting smart cards to Cameroon; Dangote exports clinkers to Cameroon; Avila Natural exports black soap and Shea Butter to Kenya.

"Flour Mills Nigeria, exporting native starch to Algeria; Craft Methods Limited, exporting alcoholic bitters to Uganda; Ruchim Limited, exporting SIM and bank cards to Kenya; Tolaram Group, exporting wrappers to Egypt; and Hwani Industry Nigeria Limited, exporting water closet sanitary sets to Kenya," Awolowo stated.

This came as the Comptroller-General of Customs, Adewale Adeniyi, disclosed that Nigeria joined the AfCFTA in 2020, aiming to facilitate cross-border trade within Africa; saying, "AfCFTA participation would open new business and economic growth opportunities for Nigeria and strengthen African relationships," the customs boss stated.

He disclosed that due to delays in phase one, some African nations like Rwanda and Ghana have begun trading and that the NAC studied Rwanda and Ghana's best practices to prepare Nigeria for phase two participation.

"The NCS is prepared to fulfill its role and has taken actions including training of officers on AfCFTA rules of origin in collaboration with WTO experts, preparing and issuing certificates of origin in both paper and electronic formats, deploying officers trained in AfCFTA export procedures, and designating specialised customs ports for faster export clearance," he explained.

Last line

AfCFTA is a free trade area founded in 2018, with trade commencing as of January 1, 2021. It was created by the African Continental Free Trade Agreement among 54 of the 55 African Union nations. The free-trade area is the largest in the world in terms of the number of participating countries since the formation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Accra, the capital of Ghana serves as the Secretariat of AfCFTA and was commissioned and handed over to the AU by the President of Ghana Nana Akufo-Addo on August 17, 2020 in Accra.

Ex-President Muhammadu Buhari constituted and inaugurated the Presidential National Action Committee on AfCFTA (NAC-AfCFTA) on November 19, 2019 to proffer viable strategies for the implementation of AfCFTA. The committee consists of Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), the Organised Private Sector, academics, and representatives of the civil society. The launching of the GTI on Tuesday underscores the effort the committee has made to ensure that Nigeria effectively keys into the estimated \$50 billion annual trade volume of the free trade area.