

When on May 10, two hitherto good friends from the Ezillo and Ezza Ezillo clans in Ishielu local government area of Ebonyi State, had what could easily pass for minor differences over a little portion of land in a local Isimkpuma food-stuff market in the area, little did they know that that avoidable disagreement was capable of throwing the once peaceful community into what has become an endless supremacy battle.

A version of the story had it that trouble started when a young man in his late twenties from Ezillo, Chukwuma Agbo wanted to erect a structure in a local food stuff market in the area for the purpose of running his private telephone business an action that was vehemently opposed by his Ezza-Ezillo brothers, who insisted that though they were settlers in the area, they had used their resources to acquire most of the land and as such had the sole right to allow whoever they wish access to it.

"The people were still arguing when an Ezza man, who obviously was trying to exhibit an act of exuberance pushed the Ezillo man and further set his motor-cycle ablaze apparently to scare him away from the place. In the process, the Ezillo brothers intervened and that led to destruction of properties. While the Ezillo people went into the village destroying the properties belonging to the Ezza people, they (Ezza) people also carried out what could simply be termed a reprisal attack. The rest is history," a source who claimed that he witnessed the entire crisis told THISDAY.

Though, the two young-men may not be having grudges against themselves any longer, what their disagreement has caused is better seen than imagined. As at the last count, unconfirmed reports have it that no less than 18 persons have lost their lives, while over 100 houses, several cars and motor-bikes were all set ablaze. The situation, emerging reports also show has defied all efforts aimed at reconciliation. Most of the villagers, including aged women and children who deserted the community in the wake of the crisis, are yet to return when THISDAY visited the communities last weekend.

Concerned persons including the Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki, Bishop Mike Okoro, Senator Julius Ucha representing Ebonyi Central, the state government through the governor, Chief Martin Elechi, the council chairman, Onwa Ali Onwa, the police, and other security agencies, and even the leaders of the two warring clans have at one time or the other made efforts to stop the endless battle from raging on, but all these have yielded little or no results.

Even a mini-ceremony which was held at the local government headquarters in Ezillo with virtually all the traditional rulers and community leaders of the old Abakaliki zone in attendance wherein they took an oath not to inflict any more injuries on any of their people no matter the provocation has clearly been disregarded, as reports still show that the two clans have been engaged in reprisal attacks on each other, especially since last weekend.

Other business activities which were gradually picking up as at last weekend have relapsed again, while school children have been asked to go and enroll in schools in nearby communities, since there seemed to be no end in sight in the misunderstanding.

THISDAY gathered that while arrangements were in top gear to celebrate the Democracy Day anniversary last weekend, the people of the war-torn communities were busy killing and maiming themselves, not minding the heavy presence of security operatives. The situation has kept death toll on the rise that not even the police or other concerned individuals can easily get the actual figure of people who have died in the process.

It could be recalled that major stakeholders had in one of their meetings resolved that the warring factions should cease fire in the interest of peace, harmonious co-existence and progress, while also pleading with some highly placed individuals, including, the Commissioner for Finance and Economic Planning, Reginald Onwe, member representing Ishielu south constituency in the State House of Assembly, Gabriel Ede, and the traditional ruler, Eze Chima, from the Ezillo flank, and Chief Uge Umuezoka, Joseph Amana and Jude Okpoh from the Ezza-Ezillo flank to return home and prevail on their people to stop the crisis.

However, in a fresh crisis that started again after barely one week of cease-fire in the area, no less than seven persons were allegedly killed, while two from Ezillo flank were confirmed by the police, the other five from Ezza-Ezillo were said to have been secretly carried out by the rival clan in what was termed a counter-attack. It was also reported that no less than six AK47 rifles and 156 live ammunitions were recovered by the police since last Thursday when hostilities resumed.

One of the victims of the renewed war, Mr. Donatus Chima, from Okpochiri community in Ezillo who is said to be in his early forties was killed by his attackers in the early hours of Thursday, May 29, in his house. Aside from shooting the deceased,



•Relics of the communal clash...a burnt bicycle

Peace in Flight from Ezillo, Ezza Ezillo

For almost one month, the once peaceful Ezillo and Ezza Ezillo communities of Ishielu council of Ebonyi State have been in turmoil. The mayhem is as a result of a supremacy. Christopher Isiguzo writes that peace, from all indications have taken flight from the area

his unidentified assailants also "butchered him and made away with one of his hands, apparently to use it as something to show that they succeeded in their operation".

When THISDAY visited the scene of the incident, some policemen led by the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) for Ishielu local government area, Mr. Mike Onuh were seen making arrangements to convey the remains of the late Chima to the State University Teaching Hospital (EBSUTH) mortuary. The DPO however refused to speak with THISDAY.

Commenting on the incident, the Coordinator of Ishielu Development Centre, Hon. Lawson Ede who described the unfortunate incident as a "reprisal attack", expressed dismay that it was coming when the state government was still finding ways of resolving the crisis. "Early this morning, while we were making arrangements to take our people to Abakaliki for the Democracy Day celebration, we got information that Ezza people attacked one of us at Okpochiri. But before we could start anything, the DPO told us that he was already taking action on it," he stated, while ruling out the possibility of a counter-attack by the people of Ezillo.

He used the opportunity to call on the warring factions, especially the Ezza people to sheath their sword in the interest of peace and harmonious co-existence, noting that the people should allow the committee set up by the government to do its job and turn out a white paper which he hoped would ultimately point towards restoration of peace in the area.

Also, another villager, Mr. Goddy who claimed to have witnessed the incident told THISDAY that the youths of the area had gathered at the residence of the chairman of the village, Chief Ngele Igbo (where they usually gather to watch over the com-

munity since the crisis broke out) when they suddenly heard the sounds of gun shots which made them to take to their heels.

"But while we were running, Oga Dona, as he was fondly called could not escape from his house. The people now caught him. They first shot him in the leg before finally matcheting him to death. They also took one of his hands," he narrated. reacting to the renewed hostilities, a stakeholder in the community, who had the house of his aged father set ablaze in Ugbonna village in Ezillo; Mr. Chris Egbu said he was shocked to see the only house built by his father in 1991 completely razed down, and wondered why the "people we have hosted for almost fifty years will turn around to become our albatross."

"We thought that peace was already returning to our community, at a point people were opening their shops and doing skeletal activities because of apprehension. The killing of that local farmer, who obviously did not commit any sin against the Ezza people, has raised fears in the lives of people. In the past one week, we decided to respect government directive that we should not engage in counter attack. As it stands now, we see government as the final arbiter. We want them to react to this latest reprisal attack on us," he stated.

While urging government to find ways of assisting displaced people in the community, including his father, who is the second oldest in Ezillo, the younger Egbu said unless something was done urgently to provide shelter for the community leaders displaced in the avoidable war, they might have no other choice but to "live and die outside"

Going down memory lane on how the Ezza people migrated to Ezillo, Egbu who claimed that all the agreement which hitherto entitled the Ezzas to live in Ezillo were in his possession, stated that the Ezza people came to Ezillo community in 1958 on the

invitation of the people of the area, to help them in prosecuting an intra-community war against their brothers from Mgbo clan.

"Our people were told so much of the invincibility of the Ezza people in the prosecution of wars, so we had to invite them to assist us, but fortunately or unfortunately, the war did not go on again, and instead of going back to their place, they (Ezzas) chose to settle in Ezillo. Two years later, there was a native court judgment which asked them to leave but they still refused. I see what is happening now from the angle of a bubble bursting. They should leave our place in peace. If you bring a maid to come and take care of your baby for you and in the process, the baby dies, what happens, automatically the maid should leave. They claim to be invincible but all that is false," he narrated.

He further gave an indication that the people of Ezillo might once again be forced to explore the legal option, stressing that both historical and whatever perspective favoured the people of Ezillo to back all their belongings, including landed properties from the Ezzas, whom he claimed had over-stayed their usefulness.

Also commenting, another villager from the Ezza bloc who refused to have his name in print, dismissed the claims of the Ezillo people, noting that they were free to explore any option, but that they were no longer settlers but bona fide owners of the land.

"Before our people came to fight war for them in the early 1950s, we had some agreements which included the ceding of some parts of their land to us. They did that. Now, they see that the war is over, they no longer want us to enjoy all the rights inherent in our agreement with them, we are saying no to that. As it stands, the only thing that will bring peace in Ezillo is for all the parties to stick to the agreement we had with them. Anything short of that will only continue to escalate this war and we don't seem to be in a hurry to settle," he stated.

When contacted, the Police Public Relations Officer of the Ebonyi State Police Command, ASP Frederick N-nudam noted that the command was surprised when it got the report of the resumption of hostilities. He said security has been beefed up in the area warning the people to embrace peace to avoid the use of maximum force on them.

“Aside from shooting the deceased, his unidentified assailants also butchered him and made away with one of his hands, apparently to use it as something to show that they succeeded in their operation”