

Amnesty International Insists Army Killed Unarmed MASSOB/IPOB Protesters

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- ***We acted professionally, army replies, alleges blackmail***

By Senator Iroegbu in Abuja and **Christopher Isiguzo** in Enugu

Amnesty International has indicted the army and other security agencies of extra-judicial killing of 50 unarmed members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) while marking the anniversary of the heroes of the defunct Biafra in Anambra State.

But in a quick reaction, the army denied the allegation of extra-judicial killing, pointing out that their personnel acted in the international best practices and utmost restraint while members of the IPOB and MASSOB resorted to the use of weapons and other dangerous and crude cocktails leading to the death of two policemen and causing injury to soldiers and policemen alike.

Amnesty International in a release yesterday said that it conducted an on-the-ground investigation, which confirmed that the Nigerian army gunned down unarmed people ahead of last month's planned pro-Biafran commemoration events in Onitsha, Anambra state.

According to the human rights watchdog, evidence gathered from eyewitnesses, morgues and hospitals confirmed that between 29-30 May 2016, the Nigerian military opened fire on members of the Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB), supporters and bystanders at three locations in the town.

The Country Director of AI Nigeria, Ambassador Mohammed Ibrahim, condemned what he called excessive use of force to disperse peaceful protesters.

"Opening fire on peaceful IPOB supporters and bystanders who clearly posed no threat to anyone is an outrageous use of unnecessary and excessive force and resulted in multiple deaths and injuries. In one incident one person was shot dead after the authorities burst in on them while they slept.

"These shootings, some of which may amount to extra judicial executions, must be urgently and independently investigated and anyone suspected of criminal responsibility must be brought to justice," Ibrahim said.

He regretted that the exact number of deaths is unknown, partly due to the fact that the Nigerian army took away corpses and the injured.

AI stated that it had received reports from various sources on ground alleging that at least 40 people were killed and more than 50 injured.

The International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO), said that with the visits to hospitals and morgues, the organisation had confirmed – based on the initial investigation – that at least 17 people were killed and nearly 50 injured, adding that "the real number is likely to be higher".

According to AI, some of the dead and injured IPOB supporters seen by an Amnesty

International researcher were shot in the back, an indication that they were fleeing the scene when they were shot.

The body said that the leadership of IPOB claim more than 50 of their members were killed.

Part of the AI release read: "The Nigerian army has said in a statement that they acted in self defence, and five IPOB members were killed. However, Amnesty International has seen no evidence that the killings were necessary to protect life. Although the police also claim that IPOB supporters killed two policemen the next day in neighbouring Asaba, Delta State, Amnesty International cannot confirm this claim. However, such killings would not substantiate the army's argument they acted in self defence.

"A joint security operation was carried out by the Nigerian army, police and navy between the night of 29 May and throughout 30 May, apparently intended to prevent a march by IPOB members from the Nkpor motor park to a nearby field for a rally. Before the march began the military raided homes and a church where IPOB members were sleeping."

IPOB supporters were said to have told AI that hundreds of people who had come from neighbouring states, were asleep in the St Edmunds Catholic church when soldiers stormed the compound on 29 May.

A 32-year-old hair dresser who was in the church was quoted to have told AI: "At about midnight we heard someone banging the door. We refused to open the door but they forced the door open and started throwing teargas. They also started shooting inside the compound. People were running to escape. I saw one guy shot in the stomach. He fell down but the teargas could not allow people to help him. I did not know what happened to the guy as I escaped and ran away."

AI said that another witness testified how that on the morning of 30 May he saw soldiers open fire on a group of around 20 men and boys aged between 15 and 45 at the Nkpor Motor Park.

"I stood about two poles [approximately 100 metres] away from where the men were being shot and killed. I couldn't quite hear what they were asking the boys, but I saw one boy trying to answer a question. He immediately raised his hands, but the soldiers opened fire...He lay down, lifeless. I saw this myself", the eyewitness said.

The witness was said to have described how military officers loaded men with gunshot wounds

into one van, and what appeared to be corpses into another.

Later that morning, AI said that another witness described how police shot a child bystander as a group of young men protested the shootings, blocking a road and burning tyres along the Eke-Nkpor junction.

He told AI: "I heard a police siren and everybody started running helter-skelter. I ran away with other people, but before we left, the police fired tear gas at us and shot a boy in my presence. He was just hawking in the street. He wasn't even there to protest."

AI said that their researcher visited three hospitals in Onitsha and surrounding towns and saw 41 men being treated for gunshot wounds in the stomach, shoulder, leg, back and ankle. The researcher also visited mortuaries in Onitsha and saw five corpses with bullet wounds, all brought in by IPOB members on 30 May.

"AI has been informed that many of those killed or injured are still held by the military and police. Several witnesses said that the military loaded corpses in their vehicles and took them to Onitsha military barracks. Amnesty International was not able to confirm this.

"One witness told Amnesty International that around 30 people were held in the military barracks, while another witness said 23 people who were held in State Criminal Investigation Department were brought to court," the statement read.

Following the shootings, the military told media sources that the soldiers only opened fire after being shot at first, but AI's research said it has found no evidence to support this. All the people the organisation interviewed said that the protesters were not armed; one young man said that he threw stones at the police and military after they shot teargas at the IPOB members. He said the military then fired live ammunition in return.

"Information gathered by Amnesty International indicates that the deaths of supporters and members of IPOB was the consequence of excessive and unnecessary use of force.

"International law requires the government to promptly investigate unlawful killings with a view to bringing the perpetrators to justice. Amnesty International is also calling for those IPOB supporters still held in detention without charge to be either immediately charged or released," AI further stated.

"This is not the first time that IPOB supporters have died at the hands of the military. It is becoming a worrying pattern and this incident and others must be immediately investigated.

"In addition there must be an end to the pattern of increased militarization of crowd control operations as soldiers are frequently deployed to undertake routine policing functions," Ibrahim said.

However, the Army yesterday dismissed as untrue claims by Amnesty International that at least 17 unarmed members of pro-Biafra groups, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) were killed by security operatives during a clash with the group in Anambra state last month.

In a statement issued by the Deputy Army Public Relations, 82 Division, Enugu, Colonel, Hassan Gambo, the army insisted that the report by the international body was released to undermine its (army) credibility so as to remain relevant.

The army noted that the Non-governmental organisation had always been in the habit of being the judge and jury in matters of Nigeria's security without recourse to fairness, objectivity, all aimed at rubbishing the Nigerian Army for reasons best known to them, adding, "This could not be far from trying albeit unsuccessfully to be relevant and justify funding".

It therefore explained that "what transpired that fateful day was that some elements of MASSOB/IPOB engaged in violent protests which led to outright breakdown of law and order. The pro-Biafra protesters who had chosen the day to mark the 50th Anniversary of Biafra perpetrated a number of unimaginable atrocities to unhinge the reign of peace, security and stability in several parts of Anambra State.

"A number of persons were selected for attack, killed and burnt. Two personnel of the Nigeria Police were killed, several soldiers were wounded, a Nigeria Police vehicle was completely burnt down while another of the Nigerian Army was vandalised. The strategic Niger Bridge at Onitsha was at the verge of being captured particularly with the coordinated reinforcement of the violent protesters from the Asaba end of the Bridge. In addition, wanton destruction of lives and properties were brazenly carried out by the protesters who employed firearms, crude weapons as well as other volatile cocktails such as acid and dynamites. In consequence, law, order and security were grossly threatened across the State and beyond.

"The Nigerian Army in synergy with other security agencies under its constitutional mandates

for Military Aid to Civil Authority (MACA) and Military Aid to Civil Power (MACP) acted responsively in order to de-escalate the deteriorating security situation. Instructively, the military and other security agencies exercised maximum restraints against the odds of provocative and inexplicable violence that were employed against them by the pro-Biafra protesters,” it noted.

Colonel Gambo insisted in the statement that the military and other security agencies acted professionally within the extant Rules of Engagement to successfully de-escalate the budding anarchy.

“It is rather inconceivable for any individual or group to have decided to inundate the general public with an anecdote of unverified narratives in order to discredit the Nigerian Army in the course of carrying out its constitutional duties despite the premeditated and unprovoked attacks in the hands of the violent pro-Biafra mob as Amnesty International is determined to do,” the statement stressed.