

# Tension in Rivers Communities as Suspected Vigilantes Kill Scores in Night Raid

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Ernest Chinwo in Port Harcourt

People suspected to members of a local vigilance group based in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State, ONELGA Security Planning and Advisory Committee (OSPAC), have allegedly shot and killed more than 10 persons at Okomoko and neighbouring communities in Etche LGA of the state.

The victims were reported to have been attacked and slain last Saturday night during a raid by the group said to be intended to punish criminal elements in the area.

The killings sparked off riots and tensions between locals and policemen who later came to restore order.

Eyewitnesses said the vigilance group allegedly swooped on residents at local bars, forcing them to lie face down at gunpoint while they searched them for weapons.

"When the boys were all forced to lie face down, the group claimed to have used diabolical means to discover some of the boys to be criminals. They shot those they alleged to be criminals right away and disposed their bodies at the Otamiri River Bridge at Chokocho," one witness told THISDAY.

The eyewitness, who did not want to be named for his own safety, said: "The vigilantes shot sporadically for about an hour as villagers scampered to safety."

While most of the victims were killed at Okomoko, others were shot by the vigilantes at Egwi and Chokocho, according to sources in the area.

At the time of filing this report, the bodies of six of the victims had been recovered from the Otamiri River while the search for more bodies was still ongoing.

Those killed at Okomoko included Nnochiri Kingdom Alozie and Ugochukwu Otamiri.

The Chairman of Etche LGA, Hon. Obinna Elvis Anyanwu, who was alleged to have called in the vigilantes to help rid the area of criminal elements, visited Okomoko yesterday afternoon. But he could not address the community, as tension had already built up. The chairman left without addressing the people.

However, a former member of the House of Representatives for Etche federal constituency, Hon. Ogonna Nwuke, was able to calm the situation and later addressed the angry youths.

Nwuke appealed for calm and urged the youths not to take laws into their hands that the security authorities would get to the root of the matter.

Nwuke told THISDAY that: "We do not know who invited the vigilantes. That question should be put to the Etche LGA chairman.

"The flashpoint in the local government area has been the Okehi area. Why the vigilante would attack people in the Okomoko, Egwi and Chokocho axis that have been peaceful, we are yet to know."

The former lawmaker said with the aid of the police, they had been able to recover six bodies from the Otamiri River.

He said out of the recovered corpses, two each were from Okomoko and Egwi while one was a Yoruba man who used to sell drinks at Chokocho.

Nwuke said with the presence of the police, life was returning to normal as the youths were digging graves for the victims to be buried as the recovered bodies were already decaying.

The state Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO, Nnamdi Omoni (DSP), confirmed the incident, and said the police had increased their presence to forestall any reprisal.

He confirmed that five bodies had been recovered from the river but that only two had been identified by their families.