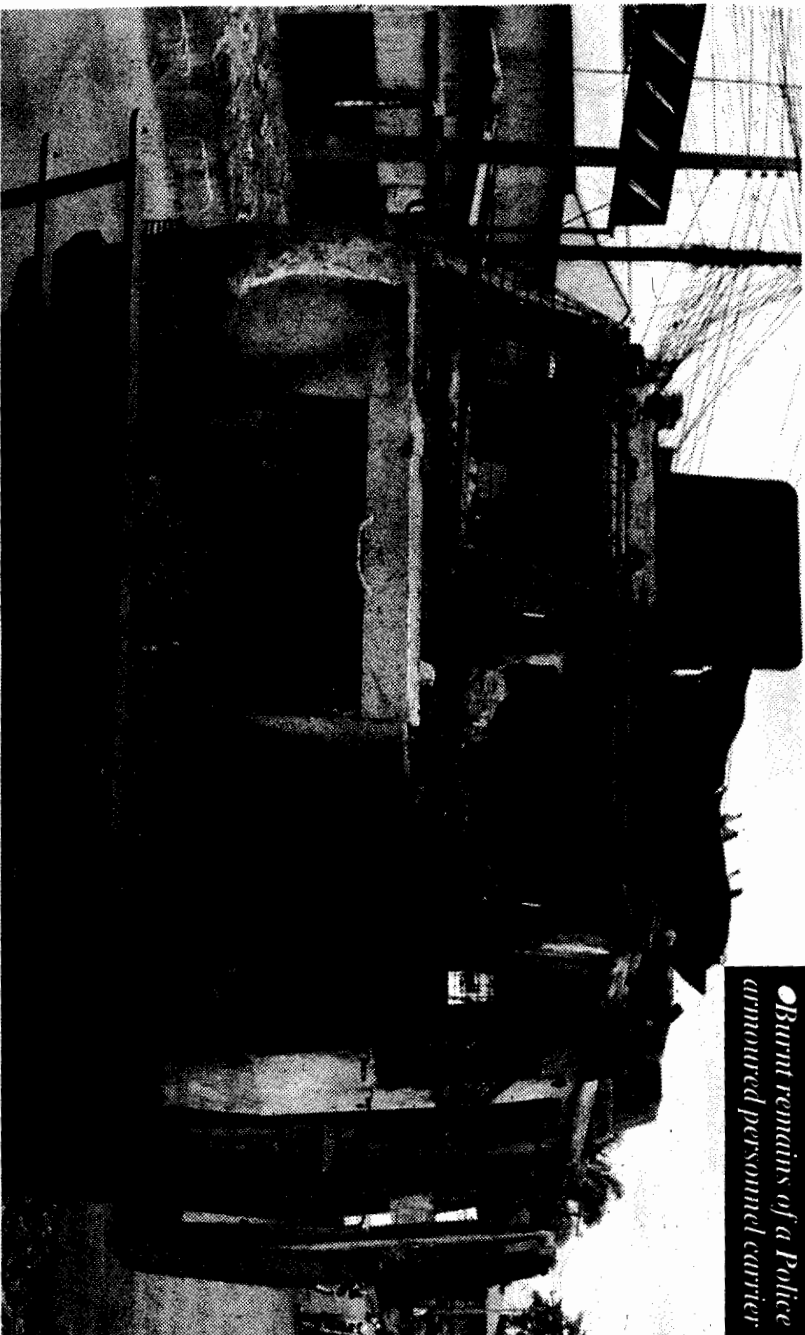


COVER



● Burnt remains of a Police armored personnel carrier

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As the worries deepen, questions are asked as to how only nine hoodlums invaded the Onitsha prison and chased away 20 security guards comprising of 16 well-armed

elements suspected to be members of Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the latter emphatically denied any involvement and asked its accusers to look elsewhere.

But is it to be believed as alleged that the rank and file of MASSOB had since been infiltrated by criminals who now masquerade as MASSOB to cause trouble? Or is it a statement being made by the outlawed Anambra Vigilante Services as a way to express anger over the state government's rejection to empower and recognize it?

NARTO which controls all the motor parks in Anambra state and collects both legal and illegal levies on the commercial vehicles that leave and come into the state, has its headquarters in Onitsha. Millions of naira are said to be made on daily basis by this group through sundry toll collections. The burden of the high illegal levies is usually passed on to commuters in form of high transport fares. This has gone unchallenged for years now. MASSOB leaders washed their hands off the recent protests in the state, but others insist that they must look

ONITSHA

● *Bloody clashes leave Nigeria's mar-*

ried city in flames

By Anayo Okoli

ONITSHA, the commercial hub east of the Niger, is a city on its knees today. The recent bloody clashes in the town have left it completely comatose and gasping for breath. It does not need the crystal ball of a soothsayer to see the depression and hopelessness which reign everywhere. Without doubt, the present crisis has impacted negatively on the economic and social life of the residents of Onitsha and its environs.

Though no casualty figure has been confirmed by the police or other local authorities, it is feared that no less than ten people might have died in the mayhem and property worth billions of naira destroyed. In addition, vehicles including police armoured personnel carrier, traders' wares, houses

and the Onitsha prison were either completely destroyed or torched.

Though stern-looking military men and mobile policemen now dot every nook and cranny of the city with their fingers hanging loosely on the trigger, the fear which pervades the entire state is thick. As things are now, business activities have drastically dwindled as customers of Onitsha traders especially from outside the state are now afraid to come into the state to transact businesses. Particularly worrisome to the residents was the attack on the Onitsha prison and the release of no less than 240 inmates among whom were hardened criminals, murderers among others.

“We’re in trouble in this state,” Chief Nnamaka Nwanzie, a public servant said. “It’s amazing that each time there’s any crisis, one of the first few places to be attacked would be the prisons. As things are, some of the inmates released by the protesters would be armed robbers and ritualists. Is that not enough danger? We’re in danger, let’s not pretend about it.”

From the petty traders to commercial motorists (Okada operators) and others who do menial jobs, the pains of the devastation have been enormous because for days, they could not leave their homes.

Condemnations all the way

Following these widespread protests that wrecked Onitsha, there have been condemnations from the high and low. Senator Joy Enmodi under whose constituency Onitsha falls, urges the Federal Government to go to any extent to unmask those behind the crisis and bring them to book. Also, Mr. Eneke

Asoanya, a former president of the Association of Market Traders in the state (ASMA-TA) insists that the people must reveal the identities of the perpetrators because they live in the midst of the troubled residents.

“All these hoodlums are not spirits. They are human beings who live with us. Therefore, our people should report their presence in their localities to the nearest security agency or the nearest police stations. They should offer useful information to the police to help them control the situation.”

Also, the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) has called on President Olusegun Obasanjo to flush out the hoodlums. “Onitsha and environs had in recent times, become the theatre of homicidal activities and other forms of criminality. For a couple of months now, major parts of the state, especially Onitsha,

prison officials, a development which prompted the Acting Comptroller of Prisons, Mr. Okwara Uche-Kalu to suspect collusion between the hoodlums and the security agents on guard. He simply could not understand how only nine persons could over-power 20 armed security guards.

Tongues continue to wag

In less than six months, Onitsha was experiencing its second bloody crisis. The first engulfed the city in January over reprisal attack following the riots sparked off by the crisis in the North over a cartoon on Prophet Mohammed in far-away Denmark. The latest which began last Thursday was blamed on a supremacy tussle between rival groups. It has been buck-passing ever since. While some people had fingered a battle for control between the Nigeria Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO) and certain

members who give the body a bad image. Thus, some alleged MASSOB members are said to have been challenging NARTO to stop the illegal collections in the motor parks and on the streets as well as other illegal tolls collected from even truck pushers. Indeed, it was this challenge that was the cause of the enmity between the two groups.

NARTO, therefore, was alleged to have solicited the support of the police to flush MASSOB out of Anambra, particularly Onitsha. Since MASSOB threw this challenge, there have been crises intermittently in Onitsha, which at times snowballed into bloody clashes that would spread to other cities like Awka, Nnewi and Ekwulobia.

The current face-off cannot be discussed without mentioning the activities of members of the banned Anambra Vigilante Service (AVS) who worked with the immediate past governor of Anambra state, Dr. Chris Ngige. The group was recruited by the former government to help protect the state when police and other security agencies were withdrawn from the then governor. It must be admitted that there was, indeed, reduction in crime rate.

Governor Peter Obi came in, and as part of the changes he introduced, he disbanded the AVS and opted to work with constitutionally-established security group working under the supervision of the police. The group, it must be said, was not happy with Obi’s action after having visited the Government House, Awka, to seek their retention. The governor emphatically turned down the requests.

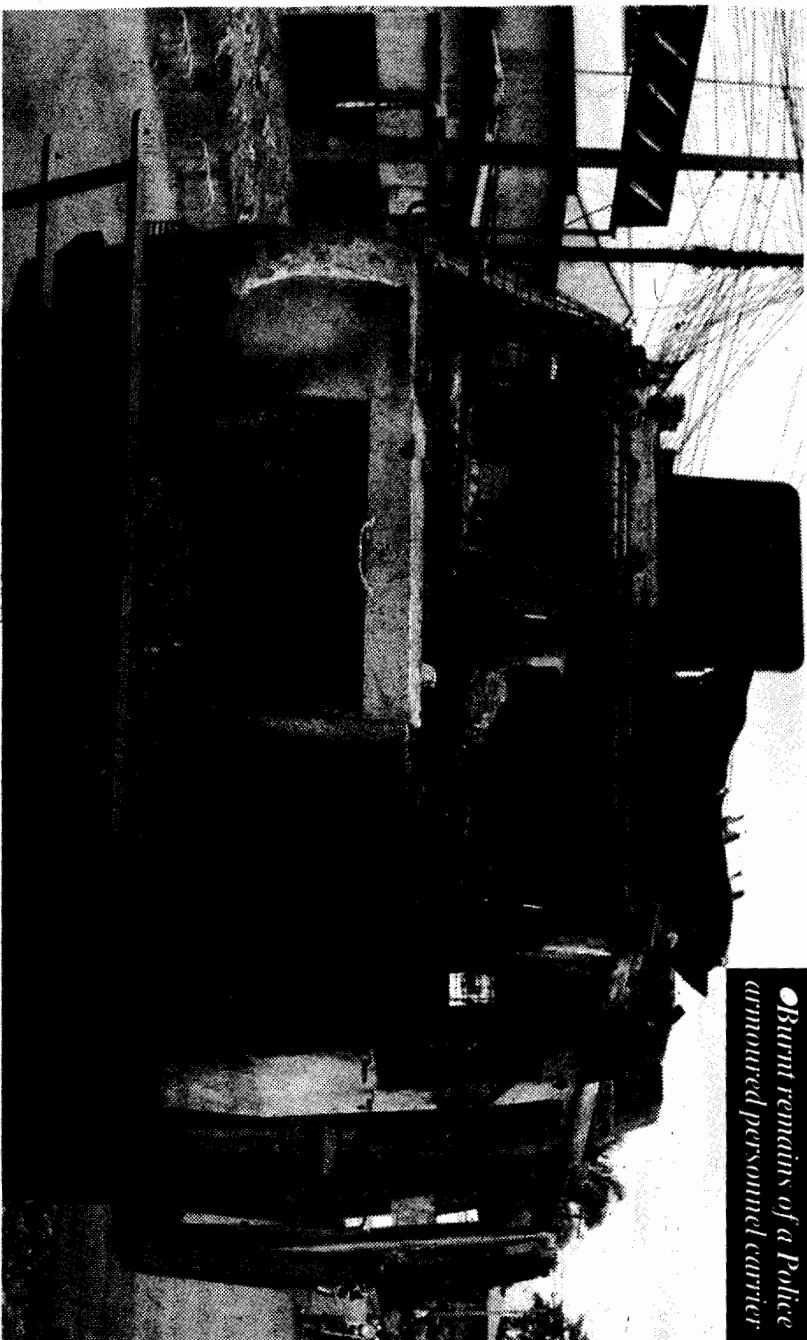
When will Onitsha and other cities in Anambra have long-lasting peace as opposed to curfew imposed on the troubled spots even if to temporarily stop the crisis from escalating?



Onitsha: A burnt police station, and right, carcass of another Police vehicle



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