

By Austin Ogwuda, Asaba

DESPITE the fact that it is generally accepted that land is a gift from God to humanity, man has waged war against fellow human beings over this gift since time immemorial. Empires and kingdoms have been founded and lost in the eternal battle of men to possess more land than others. As a result, ownership claims to land have, time and again, turned brothers against brothers, villages against villages and even nations against nations.

Here in Nigeria, land disputes are common, with such disputes claiming avoidable and uncountable innocent lives as one side tries to outdo the other. In some areas, the court option as a means of settling such disputes had been adopted, and resolved amicably in the end. In others, the problem has remained intractable, with bloody feuds arising therefrom being passed on from generation to generation.

One of such intractable land disputes is the one between two communities in Delta State. The communities in question are Umuebu and Amai, both in Ukwuani local government area of the state. This is becoming a legendary dispute that has snowballed into a crisis which has defied all attempts at arbitration, including legal action that has gone up to the Supreme Court. Yet, the battle over land between the two communities has remained fierce. *Saturday Vanguard* discovered that the Umuebu-Amai land dispute has lasted for over 50 years now.

Investigation showed that for the past 50 years, these two neighbouring communities have not known peace because of this piece of land. It has always been tension, destructions and then killings each time the communal crisis rears its ugly head. It is pathetic that on each occasion, which happens from time to time, these two sister communities with a lot in common engage each other in life-consuming duels.

The most recent took place on the May 2, this

year. It was so fierce that as at the last count, over ten persons lost their lives, a petrol station burnt and many buildings and other properties were set ablaze.

The sight of headless bodies here and there in the area told the story of how sordid the situation was. The worsening part of it was that secret killings were reported to be going on and as at the time of this report, no one can actually say how many people have been killed or are missing, or otherwise displaced.

Initially, the Police confirmed only three deaths, among which were two headless bodies. In fact, the two communities became a no-go area. Even with the presence of the mobile policemen, visitors were not allowed to enter as each of the warring communities perceived each other as having gone to hire mercenaries to help their war effort.

Trouble started on that fateful Wednesday, May 2 when a native of Amai community, taking advantage of the farming season, was said to have gone to farm on the alleged disputed land. He was quickly challenged and chased away by the Umuebu people, who claimed that they are the rightful owners of the parcel of land.

On arriving home, the Amai farmer narrated his experience at the hands of Umuebu people. Thus, his kinsmen, the Amai people were peeved. Next was a bloody fight between the duo. It escalated on

Thursday night.

While the hostility was going on, another neighbouring community, Ezionum, said to be sympathetic to one side, joined in the fight. By the next day, Friday, May 4, the State Police Commissioner, Mr. Hezekiah Dimka raced to the scene as early as 5 a.m. for a first hand information and on-the-spot assessment of what had transpired. The level of devastation he saw prompted him to immediately order for a reinforcement of three Mobile police units comprising of about 200 mobile policemen.

It was a tale of woes when our reporter visited the affected communities especially Amai where the destruction was more evident.

Till today, those whose houses were burnt and many of the villagers were yet to return home. They are still hiding outside their village and taking refuge in other places. Some aged people and able-bodied young men are frightened because of the possibility of any reprisal attack. From both sides, the villagers now live as refugees in their own homes.

But a month after the crisis, the police authorities are yet to arrest anybody. Asked why it has been so, the State Police Command's spokesperson, Miss Olabisi Okuwobi said: "We don't want to increase the tension. We will definitely make arrests but if we do that now, we might be accused of taking sides

should we pick suspects from one community. We will be discreet about that", she stated.

Meanwhile, a 19-man

peace committee charged with the responsibility of bringing lasting solution the age-long crisis has been instituted. Inaugurating the

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My efforts to quell the crisis, by lawmaker

HOWEVER, Member representing Ukwuani constituency in the Delta State House of Assembly Mr. Paul Okpue has waded into the crisis, initiating efforts to bring lasting peace to the troubled communities. His words:

"The first day it was Amai and Umuebu but on the second day Ezionum had joined the war. Then I knew we were in serious trouble. That was what really propelled me, going to see how I can wade into the crisis.

After deliberating with the chiefs and the plan to go the next day my instinct told me that if I don't move now this thing will escalate. I told the chiefs that I was moving to the battlefield alone because I presumed that I have good will with all of them and I wanted to exhaust that. And to my

surprise when I went to Amai first of all, the whole town was deserted, no single soul just some few elements and those elements were like those who were waiting to ward off any attack. So I said wait a minute this is dangerous

"So I had to look for prominent chiefs who were hiding precisely I met Chief Alonu who was hiding somewhere with some policemen. I called him out so my presence helped when they heard that I was in town everybody now started to come out their confidence started buoying but I could see fears in the eyes.

After going through the three communities I now became the mediator each of them were calling me on the phone telling me that. I was like the peace com-

mittee, the former deputy governor of the state, Chief Benjamin Elue had urged the warring communities to sheathe their swords and ensure they (communities) work with the committee to ensure lasting peace in the area.

According to him, "it is important that the communities work freely with the committee because that is the only way lasting peace can be achieved between them." Five persons were nominated from each of the three communities.

Despite all assurances, however, palpable fears still grip these three villages, with the victims not in a hurry to return back. For the three communities of Umuebu, Amai and Ezionum, it is peace of the graveyard.

mander not war commander now because they all now believe my neutrality and my genuineness in seeking for lasting solution that was how the crisis got nipped at the bud.

"I was able to douse the tension. The DPO, the security agents were happy that my effort paid off. Now the same communities are now calling me to ask me to organize a peace conference and I have drafted a letter and the peace conference is going to be organized in this way. We are going to call everybody together. I am going to be the facilitator but the elders do the talking and it is going to happen in Umutu. We are going to kill goat eat together then we move on to the reason why we are fighting and see how we can remove that reason so that that problem is not there any longer."