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## An invasion that left Freedom Market in tatters

By Okey Ndiribe

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FREEDOM Market near Mile Two area of Lagos was like the scene of a fiery battle last Thursday. Both the front and rear gates of the market had been pulled down. The rear gate was said to have been hurled into the Kirikiri canal located at the back of the market and was later pulled out by divers.

Many of the shops in the market had their doors pulled down and the goods inside them littered on the floor. Traders in the market gathered in groups while discussing the situation in low tones.

One of the traders whose shop was broken into after the door had been pulled down spoke to Vanguard Features (VF). Chika Okoma- a dealer on motor spare parts and car stereo- said about 23 pieces of car stereo valued at N115,000 were looted from his shop. Godwin Nwankwo-a past President of Freedom Merchants Association - showed VF the door of his shop that was also forced open.

He told VF that a nearby travel agent's office was also broken and two international passports left in the office the previous day were stolen by the invaders.

Chinedu Atuanya, who witnessed the invasion of the market told VF that the raiding party was made up of about 20 area boys accompanied by five armed policemen.

Said he: "We were all in front of the market last Thursday morning waiting for the gates to be opened. All of a sudden, we heard gun shots coming from the direction of Mile Two. We immediately ran into the market thinking that we would be safer there. But to our greatest surprise, we saw the invading group accompanied by five policemen rushing into the market from the back gate".

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He further informed that as the invasion was going on, some other traders around phoned the Divisional Police Officer of Kirikiri Police Station who immediately sent another team of policemen to the market to ascertain what was going on. When the policemen from Kirikiri Police Station arrived the market, they were urged to arrest the invaders but they declined and advised the traders to keep their distance while the situation was still very charged.

“The policeman told us that if anybody was killed at that stage, his life would have been wasted for nothing,” he said.

Another trader at the market who witnessed the incident identified himself as Evangelist Christian Ohanyi. He said he had reached the nearby Mile Two at about 9 a.m. last Thursday but ran into a very serious traffic jam.

Said he: “When I noticed that something was amiss in the area, I thought that hoodlums were fighting. So I immediately removed my chain and wrist watch. But when I arrived at the entrance of Freedom Market, I observed that a crowd had gathered outside.”

Ohanyi said he saw a policeman who seemed to have come from Kirikiri Police Station that was trying to use his police radio to communicate what had happened to other police formations in the state in order to find out the mission of the policemen who accompanied the invaders.

He remarked that it was while this was going on that the invaders began to gradually withdraw from the market and eventually left, adding that the invaders were led by one Makinde who was said to be a Deputy Superintendent of Police at the State Criminal Investigation Department ( SCID), Panti Street, Yaba-Lagos.

It was learnt that during the invasion of the market, one of the traders identified as ThankGod Anyaegbu was shot in the abdomen and arrested with 32 others. Some of those who were also arrested were Daniel Ejereonyeoku, Andrew and Ikechukwu. Others were Emmanuel Esho, Sule Safo and Uzoma Asoeze.

In his own comments about the incident, the Interim Chairman of Freedom Merchants Association, Steve Ezeogu, said he was called on phone and informed about the invasion and looting of the market on Thursday Morning, adding that the invaders arrived the market in 10 buses.

Said he: “We don’t know what their mission was in the market but information available to me indicates that they looted over 80 shops”.

He alleged that the invaders carried away a complete safe from a trader’s shop which contained over N500,000 cash.

“They collected cash of N120,000 and six laptops from one of the shops,” he said. He claimed that a total of three million Naira cash was stolen from the market, adding that some women were raped. He confirmed that one of the traders in the market was shot by the invaders.

Ezeogu recalled that last February, the market was also invaded by some people who were recruited from the Lagos State Ministry of

### Physical Planning and Environment.

Said he: “Some people came here from the Ministry of Physical Planning and Environment last February. They demolished and looted many shops”.

He alleged that the landlord of the market, Chief Dele Afolabi, was behind the invasion.

He further remarked that the incident led to a court case presently pending at the Lagos High Court, adding that the landlord had not been appearing in court for the case.

Said he: “The case was filed as suit number 2D/181/2007 with Sylvanus Umeaku and five others as plaintiffs. Chief Dele Afolabi, Dele Afolabi and Brothers, the Ministry of Urban and Physical Planning, the Attorney General of Lagos State and the Governor of the State were mentioned as defendants”.

When contacted on the matter, the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of SCID, Mr Leye Oyebade declined comments and referred VF to the State Commissioner of Police.

But a senior police officer who spoke to VF on condition of anonymity said that men of SCID invaded the market based on a petition that was written to the state police command alleging that the market was being used as an ammunition dump.

The source said that when the SCID men stormed the market, they actually found some arms and ammunition, adding that those who were arrested at the market would soon be charged to court.

The source also stated that all innocent persons who were arrested during the raid had been released, adding that even the President of the Freedom Merchants Association had confirmed that some of those arrested were miscreants.

The source said that there is a hide-out used by criminals behind the market.

Efforts to contact Chief Dele Afolabi proved abortive. When VF visited his office, he was not there. A security guard who identified himself as Ujong at Chief Afolabi’s building which is close to the market said the Chief had never been to the house in recent times. But he referred VF to another man who was said to be the chief’s relative.

The man who identified himself as Jacob Afolabi confirmed that Chief Afolabi had not been visiting the area regularly for sometime. He said he could not assist VF to locate Chief Afolabi, adding that he did not even have his phone number. He remarked that it was possible that Chief Afolabi had gone to Kwara State.