

## NEWS

## Soboma George: The villain turned patriot

By GEORGE ONAH, PH

FIRST, the unpleasant side of Soboma George, the ex-militant who was felled by bullets from men the police said were once his supporters, in Port Harcourt on Wednesday. He had no formal education and learned no skill. He was a street fighter who, on many occasions took the law into his hand.

In 2005, for instance, he was locked up in the Port Harcourt prisons but scaled the fence into freedom. Then in 2007, he was picked up by the police for traffic offence and while awaiting trial, his boys stormed the police station, shooting sporadically, and set him free. Some policemen were killed in that encounter.

The police could not re-arrest him, yet his base was at the nose of the police headquarters. It is even a walking distance from the seat of government. Although Soboma was declared wanted by the government at the time. He led a dreaded cult group called the Germans and later the Icelanders. He joined the struggle for more resources for the oil producing areas with the likes of Mujahadeer Asari Dokubo, ex-warlord Ateke Tom, leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante. Shortly afterwards, he broke away and formed his own group. Soboma was linked to every major cult violence in Rivers State. He slugged it out with Farah Dagogo, Jackree a.k.a. Egberi Papa, Prince Igodo, Ateke Tom and Bay Loaf. He roamed the land like a dragon. The man appeared to be a law unto himself as he simply could not be arrested. The gang leader had a parallel government in Marine Base, where he was the governor-general. And now, his side:

He was one of the first ex-militant leaders to embrace the presidential amnesty which was symbolised by his surrender of a huge cache of arms and ammunition to the Federal Government on August 13, 2009.

Seventy-two hours before his death, he, according to the Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta / Chief Executive Officer, Presidential Amnesty Programme, Mr. Timi Adebisi, "actively collaborated with the Amnesty Office to draw up a list of 1000 ex-militants from Rivers State.

Those ex-militants were due to commence yesterday, a trans-functional training in Obubra, Cross River State.

But when the leadership in the state changed hands, Soboma George was cut to size. He wanted a royal treatment. Omehia was in no mood for that and made him and his henchmen to come face to face with the might of the Joint

Task Force, JTF. Consequently, there was a massive military operation mandated by then Governor Celestine Omehia to flush them out. So, on August 16, 2007, the operation to dislodge the gunmen and cultists commenced. Prior to this, the state capital had been held hostage by Soboma and his men. Residents were normally woken up by heavy shootings from Borokiri, Creek Road and Marine Base axis. He vowed to

Although he was rumoured to have died in that battle, he, escaped and fled to Abonema Town, Akuku Toru Local Government. When asked why he confronted the JTF he said he mistook them for a rival cult gang. His words: "sometimes when they (rival cult group) come to attack us, they dress in military uniform, so I thought the people who came were those people.

They bombed the place I was

It had become too late to stop the boys at that time, so I escaped and told my boys to find their way". Some folks in Port Harcourt had built a myth around him describing Soboma as an oracle. He was said to have nine lives and there were those who felt that Soboma can only be killed when his feet are not touching the ground. But all that believe changed last Tuesday, August 24, 2010 when the man was gunned down. He was not only on his feet while being killed; he was almost walking bare-footed. However, even as you read this piece, his body has not been seen by either the police or in any hospital morgue.

#### His colleagues pay tribute

Ateke Tom said "Soboma was not somebody to be got so cheaply. He died because the amnesty has disarmed everybody. Those who killed him want to truncate the amnesty programme of the Federal Government and this should not be allowed. I condemn the killing in strong terms".

Asari Dokubo said "we should not allow our state to go through that path again, this killing is uncalled for. I lost sleep through the night I heard about the killing of Soboma George. We should all rise up and condemn this senseless killing".

Wisdom Amachree a.k.a. Gen. Adekunle Black Scorpion said "The government and police should search for the killers of Soboma. He was my blood relation and I have just visited the mother in Buguma. His death has saddened us all and we have not been able to eat well since we heard about the death. He had renounced violence and was no longer armed, I wonder why somebody should just take an innocent soul like that".

Sunday Vanguard gathered that with the shooting of Soboma George fresh tension has enveloped Port Harcourt, because the followers of the man have vowed to respond appropriately. However, the security agencies have allayed fears of any fresh round of violence. They have told everyone to go about his or her normal life as a round-the-clock watch is being kept to nip any violence in the bud. The people believe this soothing promise and expect the government to stay alive to its responsibilities in this regard.



\*Soboma

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make the state ungovernable. Social and economic activities were at their ebb. Parents kept their children at home and most of the public schools were virtually empty. Civil servants kept their distance from their places of work and night life

staying and I immediately ordered my boys to fight back, but when I saw helicopters firing in the air, naval boats sailing and many army boys and armoured tanks around my territory, it was then I knew that they were real army people.