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Again, fresh communal clash in Benue leaves 10 dead

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BY PETER DURU, Makurdi

JUST when efforts of the Benue State government to ensure peace in some troubled hinterlands of the state was paying off, an unanticipated explosive communal conflict erupted few days ago at a southern district of the state, an area that is renowned for its serenity and tranquility.

No fewer than 10 persons were feared dead with property worth millions of naira destroyed in a bloodbath that ensued between the inhabitants of Ojantele and Ijegwu communities in Otukpo and Obi local government areas of the state.



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Vanguard Metro gathered from an eyewitness that fighting erupted between the bordering communities last week following renewed dispute over a piece of land adjoining the warring neighbours.

According to our source, houses, huts and economic trees were not spared by the warring communities leading to the displacement of close to 120, 000 inhabitants of the affected communities who are fleeing from the crisis.

It was also reliably gathered that among those who lost loved ones in the conflict was the Benue State Commissioner of Finance, Mr. Omadachi Oklobia, whose cousins were reportedly slaughtered in the ensuing fighting.

Lawmakers call for Police intervention: Reacting to the renewed conflict at its sitting on Wednesday, the Benue State House of Assembly, in a motion called on the Benue State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Christopher Katso to dispatch officers and men to the crisis zone in order to restore law and order in the communities.

Raising an issue of urgent importance at the floor of the House, Mr. Baba Ode, representing Otukpo/Akpa constituency, intimated the House that he received a phone call from an anonymous caller intimating him that fighting had erupted between his constituents and the neighbouring Ijegwu community in Obi Local Government Area.

Receipt of text messages
Ode said that thereafter he received text

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messages from relations who informed him of the escalation of the crisis leading to the death of his close associates and friends adding that as at Tuesday night, not less than six deaths had been recorded in the crisis.

He lamented that the brotherly communities had in the last 10 years intermittently engaged each other in fracas despite efforts to find lasting solution to the dispute, saying: "The problem we have in this country is that whenever there is a crisis anywhere and peace is restored, everyone goes home with no efforts put in to ensure that permanent peace is restore in the affected area. That is exactly the situation we have found ourselves in this particular case".



One of the burnt houses during the crisis

The lawmaker urged the House to compel the surveyor general of the state to carry out a proper demarcation of the boundaries of the affected communities as remedy to the dispute.

In his reaction, Mr. Nick Eworo representing Obi constituency, called on the state government to dust up the report of the panel of enquiry set up in 1996 to investigate the crisis with a view to finding

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lasting solution to the crisis.

Royal father appeals to Governor,
President: Meanwhile, in a letter of protest, written to the Benue State governor and copied to the Senate President and other relevant personalities and agencies by the clan head of Aagboko, Chief Anmo Ejoga, whose domain was devastated by the rampaging Obi youths, and made available to Vanguard Metro, the paramount ruler condemned the unwarranted attack on his subjects.

The paramount ruler pointed accusing fingers on some prominent personalities in Obi local government and specifically fingered the Council chairman for leading the onslaught against his people.

He said: "Our people in Otobi woke up in the morning of Tuesday, August 7, 2012 to find out that a large portion of our farmland at Otobi-Akangwu had been cleared and freshly planted with palm and orange trees. When the Otobi people got to the land the following morning to observe and report to the elders and relevant authorities, a large number of Ijegwu youths emerged from the surrounding bushes with guns, cutlasses, bows and arrows and other dangerous weapons to attack them.

"Unprepared, our people could not defend themselves and in the process a good number of them sustained various degrees of injuries. Some were abducted and taken away by the armed youths of Ijegwu".

Ejoga added that some of the abductees later escaped while others were also

rescued by men of the combined security outfit christened "Operation Zenda", while those not so lucky were slaughtered by their captors.

The paramount ruler who recalled the history of the area, regretted that the ownership of the parcel of land in question had never been in dispute since it rightfully belongs to his people who had never ceased to cultivate on it since the existence of the state.

But in a swift reaction, the caretaker Chairman of Obi local government, Ode Opila debunked the allegation that he led the onslaught and bloodbath in the area.

He said: "It's all lies. I have no hand in the crisis, all I did was to ensure peace between the feuding parties. The allegation is targeted at demeaning my personality and reputation, it is just unfortunate because I am innocent of the allegation. I sincerely advise that we find a way of settling this dispute instead of resorting to name calling and pointing accusing fingers at innocent persons."

Govt to set up commission of inquiry:
Meanwhile the Benue State government has promised to set up a commission of enquiry into the crisis.

Benue State Deputy Governor, Chief Steven Lawani who gave the promise when he led top government functionaries of the state to the crisis zone, said the state government would immediately move to embark on a proper demarcation of the boundaries of the feuding communities in

order to restore lasting peace in the area.

Lawani also appealed the National Emergency Management Agency to step in and assisting the thousands of displaced persons who now live in makeshift tenants without any source of livelihood.

Meanwhile, the Benue State Police Command has beefed up security in the troubled communities in order to stem further loss of innocent lives.

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