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Ebonyi/C'river land dispute: Slaughter without end

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From his house to the farm is only but a kilometre, and it was a walk Innocent Agbomi did almost every day. Like most people of Adadama Community of Abi Local Government Area in Cross River State, he was a farmer. But in the morning of Wednesday October 21, 2015 his singular mission was to fumigate his farm. With his fumigation machine hung on his back, he met and greeted other farmers on the way. It was the last time Agbomi was seen alive.

A few minutes later, heavy gunshots rang across the whole community. Scared for their lives, the people scampered in different directions for safety. When the gunshots died down, they cautiously followed the direction the sounds came from only to find bullet-riddled Agbomi lying dead on his farm, with his head and right leg chopped off and taken away.

His assailants had vanished into thin air. Then high-pitched wailing and cries of agony followed. The people of Adadama have lost yet another victim to the mindless and macabre killings of missing heads and limbs, the trademark of militants from neighbouring Ndiagu Amagu Community in Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, with whom they have been having protracted boundary disputes.

Origin of dispute

The boundary dispute between Adadama and their Ndiagu Amagu neighbours is believed to have lasted for more than a hundred years and 2012 was the centenary anniversary of a boundary point known as Ugoli, which Amagu people claimed was mutually agreed between their ancestors and those of the Adamama people. But a source at Adadama faulted this claim and alleged that the desire of Ikwo people is to chase every Cross River community on the Western side of the Cross River to the other side.

According to the source, the Ebonyi people are insisting that the Cross River should serve as the natural boundary between the two states and any Cross River village across the Itigidi Bridge, which runs across the Cross River, is an intruder and would be chased away. He recalled that a community called Igbo Imagbana was once on the Western side of the river where Adadama, Itigidi and other Cross River communities currently are, but due to boundary disputes, the Igbo Imagbanas relocated to their present location.

The source lamented that the boundary disputes between Ebonyi and Abi communities can be traced to the boasting of Ebonyi people that they will chase all Abi communities to the other side of the Cross River. But which party in the dispute is to be believed? Who are the aggressors and who are the victims? Another source at Adadama traced the history of the dispute to the cordial relationship which both communities had enjoyed nearly a century ago. According to him, the Adadamans and the Amagus once lived in peace and harmony, and even inter-married.

And the Amagus who settled in Adadama, and who mainly assisted the Adadamas in farming, were either paid cash or given farm produce as payment. But due to their relationship, the Adamamas resolved to be offering farmlands to the Amagus to cultivate as their payment.

“They were never offered the lands for possession, but only for them to cultivate”, the source emphasized. He added that at that time, even youths of Adadama were against the practice as they foresaw a time when future generations of Amagus could begin to lay claim to the lands. “This is exactly what is happening today. They are presently telling us they own our land, and forcefully asking us to leave by killing us and destroying our properties, making life unbearable for us.”

However, tracing the origin of the dispute, the traditional ruler of Ndiagu Amagu, His Royal Majesty, Irinogodu III, Eze Dominic Aloh stated that the boundary dispute started in 1912 following the encroachment on their ancestral land by the Adadamas, and that their neighbours had often been the aggressors.

History of clashes

Though both communities have had a history of clashes over ownership of the land presently occupied by the Adadamas, the genesis of the recent hostilities could be traced to the abduction of four Adadamas on January 13 and 14, 2013. Armed militants believed to have come from Amagu invaded Adamama farmlands and abducted Mrs. Ekama Edu Ekpala and Chief Vincent Ekpa Egbe. Chief Egbe was later found with several machete cuts on the head and other parts of his body, and was rushed on the same day to the Eja Memorial Hospital in Itigidi for medical attention.

Among the casualties were Mr. Anthony Enang Isang who was shot dead, and Mr. Edu Sylvester who was also fatally shot, but survived the gun wounds. The militants vandalized a border police post constructed by the Cross River State Government. The Amagus also alleged that eight persons of their own were abducted and several others wounded.

Following was a ceasefire mutually agreed between the two communities that they would not attack each other, rather they agreed to meet on Monday, January 21, to carry out a joint assessment of the disputed land and the meeting would involve the Chairmen of Abi and Ikwo Local Government Councils and the Divisional Police Officers as well as other government officials from Ebonyi and Cross Rivers and leaders from the two communities.

But that was not to be. Two days to the meeting, on January 19, 2013, a day the people of Adadama had scheduled to bury their dead from the clash, the community was yet again invaded by alleged militants from Amagu, where children, men, women, the aged, the weak and the infirm, and even animals were not spared as the invaders were clearly out to kill and destroy anything they set their eyes on.

Incidentally, among those killed was an Ebonyi princess married to an Adadama man: Mrs Mavis Egbe, a 38-year-old mother of two children, ages six and one. She was the daughter of the late Eze of Etiti Uburu Community in Ohaozara Local Government of Ebonyi State, His Royal Highness, Eze Agwu Akpa. She held a B.Sc in Biochemistry from Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State and worked as a Desk Officer in charge of hostel accommodation in the Student Affairs Department of the University of Calabar, Cross River State. She was at Adadama for the funeral ceremonies of her husband's aunt.

Unknown to the Ebonyi militants, they had killed their daughter and sister who was married to an Adadama man. Killed alongside with her was a cyclist, who was taking her to safety in Itigidi. He was identified as Christian Edu Ideaba, an indigene of Ikamine Clan in Itigidi Community.

Even with accusations and counter accusations, restoration of peace to the warring communities appears to be only a mirage. Will the death of Agbomi bring about renewed hostilities or motivate renewed efforts towards finding a permanent peace?

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