

Ahead of re-run polls: Fear, unease as Rivers violence claims 2 soldiers

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P-HARCOURT—Ahead of tomorrow's federal and state legislative elections in Rivers State, tension reached feverish pitch, yesterday, after an Army Major and another soldier were killed in the latest burst of violence.

While the soldiers were killed in the creeks of Abonema in Akuku Toru Local Government Area supposedly by sea pirates, the capital city, Port-Harcourt was also not spared as an unidentified young man was killed with a loaf of bread he was eating in his hand, in what is believed to be an assassination.

Meanwhile, the political gladiators were unsparing in their denunciations of the actions of one another. Governor Nyesom Wike, who is marshalling the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, campaigns, yesterday, alleged plots by the rival All Progressives Congress, APC, to get the advantage in the polls through the arrest of leading PDP members, including state party chairman, Felix Obuah. He vowed that the people of the state would resist what he described as a scheme by the APC to gain the advantage.



Wike and Amaechi

The governor's assertions were echoed by the PDP National Publicity Secretary, Chief Olisa Metuh; Senators Matthew Urhoghide, PDP, Edo South and Samuel Anyanwu, PDP, Imo East.

The assertions were, however, countered by APC leader in the state and

Minister of Transportation, Rotimi Amaechi, who flayed what he called the governor's panicky political measures against the people through the declaration of two-day public holidays.

The death of the soldiers was confirmed by the Army, yesterday, in a press statement issued by the spokesman of the 2 Brigade, Captain Lazarus Eli. He said the two died during a fierce gun battle in Abonnema, Akuku Toru Local Government Area.

The Brigade Commander of 2 Brigade of the Nigerian Army, Brigadier-General Stephenson Olabanji confirmed the attack before Captain Eli issued a formal confirmation on the casualties.

He said: "At about 11 am today, Thursday, March 17, 2016 (yesterday) troops on patrol in Abonema, Akuku Toru LGA of Rivers State had a fierce encounter with unknown gunmen. Our troops displayed extraordinary valour. Unfortunately, an officer and a soldier who sustained various degrees of injuries during the encounter lost their lives.

"We are in pursuit of the criminals and we will surely get them. All law abiding citizens are urged to go about their lawful activities. The army will continue to make necessary sacrifices to ensure sustainable peace, security of lives and property of all."

Vanguard gathered that the incident occurred on the waterways and the officer involved was of the rank of a Major.

Meantime, the PDP and the APC in the state have expressed worries over the development.

Deputy Publicity Secretary of the PDP, Mr Sam Wonosike describing the attack as painful said: "It is a really painful story to hear. Security operatives should track those behind this evil act."

On his part, spokesman of the APC in the state, Mr Chris Finebone, urged security operatives to intensify efforts to arrest those behind the incident.

"People should hearken to the call for peace. When people take violence to

security agents, then we begin to worry about unarmed voters whose only job is to go and cast their votes.

Rivers Govt blames APC

In its reaction, the state government in a statement issued by the state Commissioner for Information, Dr Austin Tam-George called for an international enquiry into the incident which he, however, blamed on APC agents.

The Commissioner said: “The Government and people of Rivers State are saddened by the unfortunate killing of the officer and another soldier. We call for an independent international investigation to ascertain those behind the killings.

“However, we strongly believe that APC-sponsored cultists may be behind the killing of these soldiers in their ugly plot to pitch innocent Rivers communities against the military.”

Peterside slams Wike

The APC governorship candidate in the 2015 election, Dr. Dakuku Peterside blamed the killing on what he alleged as the provocative statements by the governor, who he alleged was camping 3,000 boys in the area of the attack on the soldiers.

Peterside, who is the Director-General of the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency, NIMASA, in a statement issued by his special assistant (media) Mr. Sylvester Asoya said: “What has happened today (yesterday) reinforces our earlier position on the conflagration that is capable of resulting from the hate speeches of Wike and members of the PDP.

“How can this needless loss of lives be explained on the eve of an election? Those who are responsible for these unnecessary deaths and violence in Rivers State have indeed taken Rivers State and the entire country for a ride for too long.

“But we must not continue like this. This is a re-run election, not war. We have all watched in the last couple of weeks, the governor’s utterances and

instructions and we know that the fruits from his inciting speeches would be harvested in a matter of time. The world can now see the consequences of those statements.

“I think this madness must stop. Even as we prepare for this re-run election, there are information making the round that over 3,000 boys have already been imported into Abonema for Saturday’s elections from neighbouring Delta and Bayelsa States. This is where we find ourselves today but we must all wake up and save Rivers State before it is too late.”

Another youth killed in Diobu

Also, unknown gunmen on Wednesday night shot dead a youth at Abba street, by Iloabuchi Road, Diobu in Mile 1 area of Port Harcourt.

Eye witnesses said the gunmen drove in an SUV to where the victim sat with two other friends at about 9 pm and opened fire on him. The assailants reportedly ensured he died before they left the scene. The deceased identified as Suo, reportedly held a loaf of bread when the gunmen shot him. Eye witnesses said the loaf of bread which was still on the scene had splashes of his blood as at yesterday morning.

It could not be confirmed if the victim was a member of any political party or if the attack was related to tomorrow’s election.

The state Police Public Relations Officer, DSP Ahmad Muhammad said he was yet to receive information on the incident.

Meanwhile, Governor Wike was leaving nothing for the imagination on his determination to retain the ascendancy of the PDP in the state, even as he flayed alleged actions by the APC controlled federal authorities to gain the advantage through intimidation of PDP officials.

The governor alleged that the Police High Command had put machinery in place to arrest the state PDP Chairman, Mr Felix Obuah before the re-run elections to give advantage to the APC.

The governor also denounced the decision of the Police to declare the

Chairman of Asari-Toru Local Government Area, Sabomabo Jackrich wanted, few days to the elections, adding that the police might have been influenced by political considerations. Jackrich, according to a police bulletin, was declared wanted following intelligence reports which led to the alleged discovery of arms and ammunition in his residence.

Speaking in Port Harcourt, yesterday during a radio phone-in programme, Governor Wike said the planned arrest of the PDP Chairman would be resisted by the people.

He lamented that the police actions were despite the support he had given the police in the state.

“Today, we received information that policemen from Abuja are in the state to arrest the PDP State Chairman. If the police want to arrest PDP leaders 48 hours to the election, the action is simply politically motivated,” he said. The police in Rivers State, however, denied knowledge of the planned arrest of Obuah.

Governor Wike also described as unfortunate reports credited to President Muhammadu Buhari on the violence in Rivers State, noting that the President never contacted him for explanation on the security situation in the state.

The governor’s criticism of the president’s speech on the violence in the state was also echoed by Senators Urhoghide and Anyanwu in separate interviews with **Vanguard**.

Senator Urhoghide in an interview urged the president not to be selective in his attitude towards violent eruptions saying: “As a party, the PDP is against election violence no matter the description, and of course, perpetrators of election violence should be brought to book, but President Buhari must not be selective.”

Senator Anyanwu said, “Nobody will support violence, whether political or otherwise, Nigeria has gone beyond political violence and crisis. President Buhari’s take on violence in Rivers State should not be like giving a dog a bad name just to hang it.”

The national leadership of the PDP also weighing in on the development

alleged a plot by the ruling APC to instigate violence in the state for the purpose of allowing security men to undermine the integrity of the elections.

The Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, has 24, 930 ad-hoc staff for the Rivers re-run polls.

Meanwhile, a Rivers State High Court sitting in Port Harcourt, Wednesday, restrained the Chief of Defence Staff, the Brigade Commander of Amphibious Brigade and the Chief of Army Staff, from deploying military operatives for the re-run elections.

In a ruling delivered by Justice George Omereji in a suit filed by the PDP Chairman, Felix Obuah and the PDP, the Court ordered: "That an order of interim order be made and is hereby made restraining, Chief of Defence Staff, Chief of Army Staff, Brigade Commander, 2nd Amphibious Brigade, whether by themselves, their agents, servants, officers and operatives or privies from interfering with the applicants' right to freely participate in the government of Nigeria either directly or through free chosen representatives, threaten to arrest, harass, intimidate, torture, incarcerate the applicants and their members during the rerun elections for the State and National Assembly on March 19, 2016."