

update?

special

ON SUNDAY

specialreportonsunday @vanguardngr.com

OGBE-IJOH — ALADJA CONFLICT

How Ijaw, Urhobo power brokers add fuel to fire

- The claims and counter-claims
- Okowa steps in, sues for peace

FROM available security report, it was comprehensible that the dispute between Ogbé-Ijoh (Ijaw) and Aladja (Urhobo) in Warri South-West and Udu Local Government Areas, Delta State respectively was degenerating into a tribal conflict, especially after two persons, Samson Bebebo (Ijaw) and James Elvis (Urhobo), were beheaded and their heads taken away by their killers.

There was also information that some leaders of the feuding communities were encouraging the crisis. So, when Governor Ifeanyi Okowa summoned Ijaw and Urhobo traditional rulers to an extended Security Council meeting in Asaba, the state capital on December 20, he spoke his mind to them.

He said government was losing patience with the perpetrators of the crisis, saying he would not allow it to degenerate into an inter-tribal war.

Okowa said: "We have been doing a lot to stop the crisis, but it appears these our brothers are not ready for peace and are ready to drag us into an ethnic war, which will not help anybody. We cannot close our eyes to the inherent danger in their actions."

I have directed the security agencies that the presidents-general, youth and women leaders of the communities should continue to report weekly to the Naval Base and they should be held responsible if there is further escalation of the crisis".

He appealed to the traditional rulers, especially that of Aladja and Ogbé-Ijoh communities, to cooperate with government and security agencies in enshrining lasting peace, adding that appropriate actions might be taken against them if the crisis continued.

"I have not gotten enough cooperation from the traditional rulers of Ogbé-Ijoh and Aladja communities and we have a lot of respect for your [traditional ruler's] office, but I wish to caution that that respect would be withdrawn if we have further crisis, and I will not hesitate to take appropriate actions against the two traditional rulers if we hear any further crisis. We cannot continue to act in this manner; it is time to maintain law and order in the area".

December 20 was the first time the governor was speaking sternly to the warring communities and their leaders on the Ogbé-Ijoh/Aladja conflict.

Blame

A top security chief in the state, who spoke to Sunday Vanguard before Okowa's riot act, however, asserted that the conflict between Ogbé-Ijoh and Aladja, which has lingered for nearly three decades, would have been laid to rest if the state government had been decisive on the matter.

He said: "Unfortunately, that is not the case. Government officials of Ijaw and Urhobo extraction have divergent interests in the matter, which has also extended to the Aladja (Epame and Ayama) and Isaba impasse, and they are really manifesting their tribal prejudices. Their contrasting positions have endangered the way forward."

"With due respect to the current Prof. Abedenejo Ekoko Panel that is looking into



'Neighbours at war'

The state government is playing politics with its management of the emergency. The solutions to the problem are there but nobody is implementing them

the matter, the state government has constituted enough panels. The issues are very clear; they should implement decisions of the previous panels and stop this crisis once and for all. It is distracting to security operations and peace in the state.

"Let me tell you the simple truth from our findings. The state government is playing politics with its management of the emergency. The solutions to the problem are there but nobody is

implementing them. There is a vacant land, call it buffer zone between Ogbé-Ijoh and Aladja, which the communities are killing and fighting themselves over."

"Now recommendations had been made several years ago that government should acquire this vacant land and develop structures on it. They can build barracks for security agencies and housing units, but top politicians and leaders from both Ijaw and Urhobo areas are saying no and arming their youths to cause mayhem. They do not want to cede the land to government and fall into the bad book of the communities."

"Government must take a radical decision; it should not say that because it does not want to hurt the feelings of any of the ethnic groups fail take the right step out of the crisis."

"The present government of Senator Ifeanyi Okowa was aloof on the crisis when it restarted, but our efforts paid off when we brought in the state government to set up a panel which went through all their papers, the demarcation and everything, including the buffer zone, which both parties tentatively agreed upon. Ogbé-Ijoh is ready to let go, but Aladja stressed that they are not interested in the buffer zone, that the whole of Ogbé-Ijoh is their land."

"The panel went to the archives in Benin, came up with the map where it

was discovered that half of Aladja is part of Ogbé-Ijoh. It is based on that, that the Aladja people withdrew from the committee, I mean the Abedenejo panel. Even the panel was insisting that they accept the buffer zone, but Aladja leaders said they cannot allow their land to be taken by anybody."

"Our finding as a security agency is that it is only the state government that can come into the matter, as the police can only do their work by looking for the culprits and whoever is behind the killings, but the communities are not helping matters. Part of our findings is that one of the royal fathers is even putting fuel into the fire, but I do not want to mention names. The state government already has the facts".

'Govt. in deep slumber'

Security agencies are not alone on this mindset. One of the foremost civil society organizations in Delta State, Centre for the Vulnerable and the Underprivileged, CENTREUP, commenting on the protracted Aladja, Isaba and Ogbé-Ijoh conflict, urged the state government to wake up from its deep slumber to avert a humanitarian disaster in the area.

In a statement by the Executive Director, Oghenebor Ikimi, the group said: "We call on Delta State government to immediately issue a white paper on the

Continues on page 43