

Kogi Killings: Our children, women, elders were butchered like rams – Survivor

ON APRIL 8, 2018 6:47 AMIN **SPECIAL REPORT, TRENDING BY EMMANUEL OKOGBA119**
COMMENTS

- Heart-breaking story: Schoolboy clubbed to death after telling suspected herdsmen he wanted to become a doctor*
- Monarch murdered, queen saved by ‘fingers of God’*

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It is close to one month since the people of Oganenigwu, Agbenema and Ojuwo-Ajomayegbi in Kogi East fled their communities following attacks by suspected herdsmen which left no fewer than 50 dead.

When the people would return home despite government’s deployment of special forces to the communities remains uncertain. The victims, who make a living from farm produce, are gripped by fear of hunger occasioned by their inability to harvest their crops, most of which are believed to have been destroyed by herders who have taken over their farmlands.



Salifu, nephew of murdered monarch

When Sunday Vanguard visited Oganenigwu in Dekina local government area of the state and Ojuwo-Ajomaigbi in Bassa local government area, they had virtually become

ghost communities.

The residents were said to have fled to neighbouring Anyigba, Etutekpe and Ikpakpala and Ologba in Dekina local government area and Ikende in Bassa local government. The survivors still think they are in a dream and praying they wake up soon.

Of the attacks on the communities, that of Oganenigwu was overwhelming. It was there a family of seven was wiped out in the morning. While the community thought that was the end of the massacre, the assailants returned to launch another attack in the night. A total of seventeen persons were dead.

The attackers, said to be numbering over 500, had arrived in boats that morning of Wednesday at Oganenigwu and opened fire on the people. The attackers later set fire to the residents' homes. A resident said the attack might not be unconnected with a 2015 disagreement that led to the death of four herdsmen and unspecified number of cows.

He narrated how the herdsmen used to undermine the natives by feeding their animals with their farm produce. There were even allegations that the herders were fond of harvesting the villagers' cashew nuts, which they took to market for sale, until the natives started asking how they came about the nuts when they didn't own any plantation.

It was gathered that this was what caused the crisis in 2015, leading to the death of four herdsmen in Oganenigwu. The fear of a reprisal attack in the areas affected the 2015 governorship election, as people in some wards did not come out to vote.

This was one of the reasons given for the supplementary election in the 2015 governorship election that created the opportunity for the All Progressives Congress, APC, to 'impose' Governor Yahaya Bello on Kogi after the death of its standard bearer, Prince Abubakar Audu.



*Scenes from the attacks

Gory stories

The survivors told Sunday Vanguard gory stories. Aside the slaughtering of those that could not be killed with gun, the invaders, some recounted, looted the community and carted away not fewer than 47 motorcycles belonging to residents, foodstuff, while destroying farms, especially cashew plantations. And because of the incident, women and children had to be moved to safe locations.

The dead could not be buried until three days after the attack even as four bodies were said to have been buried in one grave due to lack of energy to dig separate graves.

Ojuwo – Ajomayegbi, on its part, is a remote community located on a hill, with undulating topography and alluring vegetation. It is a fertile land suitable for crop farming which may have been the attraction for settlement. It has an estimated population of 1, 000 inhabitants. It is about ten kilometres to Oganenigu. The main means of transportation is by motorcycle – which is not readily available.

Ojuwo-Ajomayeigbe had been in conflict for many years with herdsmen.

As early as 7am on March 10, suspected murderous herdsmen, in their hundreds, stormed the village. With their small population, and most men gone to farm, leaving mostly children and women at home, the task of stopping the invaders was a herculean task. The herders, armed with sophisticated weapons such as AK47, pump action guns, cudgel and machetes, among others opened fire on the villagers, and burnt their houses.

The gory tale of a little boy was narrated by one of the survivors. According to her, the boy pathetically knelt down, begging the suspected herdsmen to spare his life to

realise his dream of becoming a medical doctor but the plea fell on deaf ears as they stripped him of his school uniform and clubbed him to death.

Another survivor, who narrated that his escape was divine, Ismaila Maji, recounted the ordeal, “We were taken by surprise. The attackers were so many and they were armed with sophisticated weapons. Residents tried to fight them but had no weapons. Our children, women, seniors were butchered like rams; motorcycles were carted away; even food stuff were evacuated from our homes. In fact, we counted up to 25 corpses while six persons were killed in Agbakaka. We had to give them mass burial. Those who sustained gunshot and machete wounds are receiving treatment in hospital.

“It may be difficult for survivors to return home, as our houses were completely burnt. We appeal to government and well-meaning individuals to help us rebuild our settlement to enable us return to our ancestral homes”.

On Saturday, March 14, Governor Yahaya Bello visited the attacked villages to see for himself the extent of the carnage. He promised to institute a judicial commission of inquiry to unravel the remote and immediate causes of the mayhem and promised to fish out perpetrators and bring them to justice while assuring the people of adequate security.

While addressing the men of the Nigerian Army from 913 Battalion drafted to the communities, Bello said he would not fold his arms and allow “armed bandits to wipe out our people”. He added, “As a government, we will, as much as possible, provide comfort for affected families, Igala Kingdom and the entire Kogi State. It is most unfortunate”.

Killers strike again

Meanwhile, as Bello was assuring the Oganenigu residents of adequate security, some people were busy gathering weapons to launch deadly attack on Omala villages. Two days after the governor’s visit, suspected herdsmen, around 11am on Monday, March 16, struck at Ajichekpa, Opada and Agbenema, killing the traditional ruler, Chief Musa Edibo, and burning 37 houses. Nine other houses were vandalised.

Nephew of the late traditional ruler who escaped narrowly, Chief Peter Salifu, 35, narrated his story, “We had premonition of the attack, what we didn’t know was the exact date it would happen. The assailants came around 11am and started setting houses ablaze. Those who ran out were shot at. We tried frantically to repel them but we were overpowered. We had earlier moved our wives and children out of the villages because we anticipated the attack and that accounted for the low casualty.

“We put a distress call to our neighbors, especially men from Abejukolo, but they could not gain immediate access because some security personnel prevented them from entering the village. When they eventually arrived, grievous damage had been wreaked on our village. My uncle, the Onuh Agbenema, was clubbed to death. We initially thought the wife, Kasuwa, was killed with him, because they were sitting together in the parlour when the assailants came; but the wife, Kasuwa Edibo, was saved by fingers of God.

“I manage a viewing centre. They set our houses ablaze including the ‘Keke Napep’ I use for my business. We have lost all our life savings. Please tell government to come to the aid of the communities in rebuilding their lives. We are now refugees in our father land.” He wept.

Sunday Vanguard gathered that some of those who escaped fell into the hands of suspected herdsmen dressed in military uniform. The escaping villagers must have thought they were nearing safety until the suspected herdsmen fired at them sending them to their early graves.

The story was the same in Iyade and Ogabifo who played host to the invaders.

Members representing Omala, Dekina/ Okura and Bassa constituencies in Kogi State House of Assembly, Aliyu Akuh, Moses Ododo and Sunday Shigaba, respectively, on Wednesday, March 23, moved a motion of urgent importance to draw the attention of President Muhammadu Buhari, Governor Bello and security agencies to the killings.

Akuh, while presenting the motion, asked government to adopt proactive measures to protect lives and property as the state was drifting towards a failed state. He urged the government of Yahaya Bello to ensure that the perpetrators were brought to justice and to reassure the people of security to enable them return home to pick up the pieces of their lives while calling on the National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA, to send relief materials to the displaced persons.

He called on security agencies to be professional in the handling of the crisis of such magnitude to avert wanton loss of lives and property.

The killings have generated controversy with some persons faulting Governor Bello over the panel of inquiry he promised to raise on the attacks. They asked whether he expected the attackers suspected to be herdsmen or their victims in their graves to appear before the panel. They put the blame for the killings at the governor’s doorsteps especially since he threw open the borders for herders to come into Kogi.