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Benue: Another 39 killed as Reps ask Buhari to declare all killer-herdsmen as terrorists

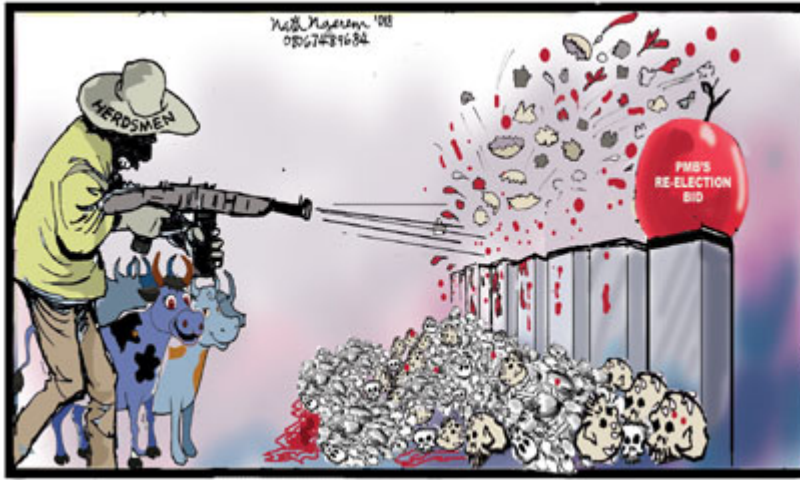
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- Pass vote of no confidence on all service chiefs, security advisers
- 3 villages sacked, 160 houses razed; Benue killings callous, unfortunate – ACF
- Army, PDP, WCC, others react

By Sam Eyoboka, Kingsley Omonobi, Ben Agande, Levinus Nwabughiogu & Peter Duru

ABUJA—Less than 24 hours after two Catholic priests and 17 worshippers were killed by suspected herdsmen at Mbalom in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, the marauders late Tuesday night and early yesterday, launched fresh coordinated attacks on three communities in Guma Local Government Area of the state,,killing no fewer than 39 persons.



Several persons also sustained injuries, with over 160 houses, huts and farmlands in the communities razed.

Meanwhile, by a unanimous voice vote, the House of Representatives, yesterday, resolved to suspend plenary for three consecutive legislative days in protest against the cold-blood killing of Nigerians by herdsmen.

The House also resolved to invite President Muhammadu Buhari to explain why the wave of insecurity in the country has persisted, despite huge funds being expended on security.

The spate of killings in just 24 hours provoked the reaction of Arewa Consultative Forum, ACF, which condemned not only Tuesday's killing of two Catholic priests and some worshippers in a church at Ayar-Mbalom community but also the latest slaughtering of 39 yesterday, saying it was "callous and unfortunate."

It also asked the Federal Government to set up a panel to investigate the incessant killings in the country by herdsmen, especially Benue State.

Again, 39 killed in Benue

Vanguard gathered from sources in the affected Benue communities that the death toll could be higher as more bodies were being recovered.

Among the communities and villages affected in the attack were Tse-Umenge, Mbadwen council ward, Mbakpase, Saghev council ward and Tse-Ali, Mbawa council ward.

Confirming the attack on his village of Tse-Umenge, a retired Permanent Secretary in Benue State public service, said close to 50 houses were burnt in his village by armed herdsmen.

He said: “In my village, Umeng, they did not kill anybody because the people had already fled but they razed over 50 houses.

“But in the council ward itself, over 15 persons were killed in the attack which commenced late Tuesday till early Wednesday, though the number might increase because the search for more bodies is still ongoing.”

Another source at Tomanyiin-Mbakpaase, Saghev Council ward who is also a journalist, said the invaders launched an attack on his community on Tuesday around 11pm.

“They came dressed in military fatigues, shooting sporadically. They also burnt down several houses and huts numbering over 62 and our food barns. So far, we have recovered three bodies in my village and everyone has fled the village because we don’t have even a Police post in the village.”

At Tse-Ali in Mbawa council ward, indigenes of the area said the well-armed herdsmen besieged the community around 11pm and spent close to four hours ransacking the community and razing over 70 houses after they had killed over 21 persons whose bodies have been recovered from the bushes.

“It was like a war situation in Tse-Ali; the sound of gunshots was coming from every direction. People were running in all directions, they killed our people who were mostly women and children like animals.

“They burnt 49 houses in the village and carted away whatever food they could carry.

“As we speak, Tse-Ali has been deserted, our people do not know where to run to because every village and community is a potential target and nobody knows where will be the next target.

“We cannot tell why they are doing this to us. These people are killing our women and children and the Federal Government is watching as if we do not have a government in Nigeria.”

No details yet –Police

Contacted, Benue State Police Commissioner, Fatai Owoseni, said he was yet to get details of the attacks.

All efforts to get the Chairman of Guma Local Government Area, Anthony Shawon, was fruitless, though one of his aides who craved anonymity said: “Chairman cannot pick any calls now because he is moving to the affected communities with medical personnel to salvage any life they can.

“You know that several communities were affected in the attack and he is trying to get to the affected places which is obviously not easy.”

At press time yesterday, many recovered bodies and the injured were being moved to Benue State University Teaching Hospital, BSUTH, where appeals were being made for people to volunteer blood to save the lives of those in dire need of infusion.

Reps on killings

The House of Representatives equally passed a vote of no confidence in all the service chiefs and security advisers to the President and asked the President to

declare all killer herdsmen in the country terrorists.

The resolutions of the House followed a motion on the incessant killings in Benue State, especially last Tuesday's episode that claimed the lives of two Reverend Fathers and 17 worshippers in a Catholic church.

The House resolved that in light of Section 14, subsection 2 (a) and (b) of the 1999 Constitution which places the security and lives of the people as priorities of government, the President has failed the nation.

Moving the motion, titled "Attack by alleged army personnel on innocent residents of Naka in Gwer-West LGA of Benue State and the inability of the army and other security agencies to quell the incessant murder of indigenes of Benue State by armed herdsmen", the sponsor, Mark Gbillah (APC, Benue State), recalled the gory incident in Naka, Gwer-west LGA of Benue State which claimed two lives, following the invasion of soldiers in a reprisal attack.

He also stated that the attacks assumed a disturbing dimension when two Reverend fathers of the Catholic Mission, Fr. Joseph Gor and Fr. Felix Tyolaha, were murdered in cold blood on Tuesday.

He said: "The House is alarmed at numerous eye-witness accounts that rampaging Nigerian Army personnel on Thursday, April 19, 2018, attacked Naka, the headquarters of Gwer-west LGA of Benue State in several Hilux trucks with Nigerian Army colours and number plates, wearing military fatigues, with name tags and carrying weapons with Nigerian Army inscribed on them.

"They intentionally torched hundreds of houses in Naka, resulting in the confirmed loss of two lives, while hundreds of victims who survived the attacks lost all their life investments and documents and are now left to fend for themselves with nothing to their names but the clothes on their back.

“The House is very disturbed by allegations that Army personnel deployed from the 72 Army Battalion in Markudi, the Benue State capital to quell the incessant inhuman murder of indigenes of Ger-west, Gwer-west and several other LGAs in Benue State by unidentified armed herdsmen took the law into their hands in a blatant display of brigandage and criminality and attacked Naka town in retaliation for the alleged murder of one of their colleagues by unknown elements in the bush, 1.5km from Naka in the evening of Wednesday 18th of April 2018.

“It is disappointing that in a manner reminiscent of the Nigerian Army’s confirmed massacre of innocent Nigerians in Odi, Bayelsa State, in 1999 and Zaki Biam, Benue State in 2001, the Nigerian Army has once again been accused of being the villain in extra-judicial actions against the citizens they are deployed to protect, even in the face of their inability to quell the siege Benue State is currently under from recurring attacks by unidentified armed herdsmen who daily unleash mayhem across several communities in Benue State with impunity.

“These attacks assumed a new dimension in Benue State yesterday (Tuesday) when two Catholic priests, Fr. Joseph Gor and Fr. Felix Tyolaha, the Church Catechist and 16 other worshippers were murdered in cold blood while attending early morning Mass at St. Ignatius Catholic Mission, Ukpo Ayar in Mbalom Gwer-West LGA and several others who attended an early morning funeral near the church by the retreating armed herdsmen.

“The House is aware that the Benue State government has raised alarm severally to the Army, the Police and other security and intelligence agencies about the alleged location of these bandits near Adaka in Markudi LGA and Gbaji in Gwer-west LGA from where recent attacks have been launched against neighboring communities.

“But it is very worrying that the Army and the Police curiously do not employ a proactive strategy to preemptively attack these locations and carry out

continuous surveillance of identified flash points but usually only respond after the fact when scores of innocent citizens have lost their lives and property.”

Other Reps react

Contributing to the debate, the members roundly condemned the killings while showing their resentment to how the government has handled the problem.

In his contribution, Dickson Takhir (Benue) alleged that the killers connived with security agencies to perpetrate the acts.

He said: “Benue is under siege and if we don’t take the necessary actions, it will amount to abdicating the responsibility of government to protect lives and property of its citizens. It appears there is no moral will to tackle the matter because continuous complaints about the killings seem to fall on deaf ears.”

Edward Pwajok (Plateau-APC), stated the need to invite the security chiefs to brief the House on their efforts to stop the killings.

“If Nigeria does not nip this in the bud, some people will be taken to the International Criminal Court, ICC. Something drastic has to be done, we don’t only have to be talking always without commensurate results; there is need to invite the service chiefs to brief the House on efforts to stop the killing,” he said.

Mohammed Nur Sheriff (Borno) in his contribution, urged the House to stage a protest in solidarity with the people. He said: “We need to protest as members of the House of Representatives to tell Mr. President that enough is enough.”

Magaji Aliyu (Jigawa), who stressed the need for the service chiefs to be sacked, said: “After a lot of money had been spent, nothing is being done. Mr. Speaker, the service chiefs must go. The Inspector-General of Police must go.

"I am of APC and I respect President Muhammadu Buhari but the truth must be told. It has gone beyond sentiments. I believe this motion should be adopted."

Musa Ada (Sokoto) asked the speaker to activate the laws to arrest the situation.

"Today we are sad, people outside laugh at us. Mr. Speaker, with all due respect, you must do something for yourself and for the members," he said.

Nicholas Ossai Nicholas (Delta) urged the House to proscribe the killer herders, since the President has failed to live up to the yearnings of his office.

"If Mr. President has failed to proscribe the herdsmen, then it requires that we can do it legislatively. Then what are we waiting for? The killing started in Agatu and today Agatu is almost wiped out. And we are here passing resolutions. How many resolutions can we pass? Mr. Speaker, lead us to Benue State. Let's see things for ourselves. Mr. Speaker, Honourable colleagues, it is high time all security chiefs resigned," he said.

Sunday Karimi (Kogi) who contended that the President has failed the people in terms of security, said: "It is bloodshed today, bloodshed tomorrow and we are still coming here to raise motions. The President we have today is not the President of 1985, it is a different president entirely."

On her part, Onyemachi Mrakpor (Delta) said "the way things are going, are we going to have 2019 when our constituents are all gone?"

The House eventually directed all its committees investigating the killings either on Benue or other states to submit their reports immediately for consideration.

Briefing correspondents after plenary, Chairman, House Committee on Media and Publicity, Abdulrazak Ndamas, said the decision to invite the President was consequent upon the belief that the security agencies were shortchanging both

the President and the country, stressing that it was pertinent to hear directly from the horse's mouth.

“The resolution to invite the President was borne out of the belief that some security agencies were not carrying out the instructions of Mr. President appropriately,” he said.

Benue Women Forum

Meanwhile, a former member of the House of Representatives and Chairperson of Benue Women Forum, Mrs. Rebecca Apedzan, has lamented that the sustained attacks and killings in Benue by herdsmen was an indication that the invaders were bent on taking over Benue State.

She said: “Benue had been surrounded and we are all at the middle. Our people are being killed everyday, even the Tivs in Nasarawa State are facing the same fate.

“They have all been chased away from Nasarawa. I have cousins who are indigenes of that State who have been chased away from the state to Benue.

“Our pain is that the federal government is simply not doing anything to stop these killings.”

ACF

In a statement issued in Kaduna yesterday, spokesman of the Arewa Consultative Forum, ACF, Muhammad Ibrahim Biu, called on the Federal Government to set up a panel of inquiry into the incessant killings.

According to the ACF, the Federal Government must ensure that perpetrators of the heinous crimes are fished out and brought to book to serve as deterrent to others.

“Arewa Consultative Forum, ACF, learned with shock and grief, the killing of two Catholic priests and some worshippers in a church at Ayar-Mbalom, a community in Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State by suspected herders on Tuesday.

“The spate of attacks on innocent people, including clergy men and worshippers in their places of worship, is most callous and unfortunate.

“ACF, therefore, calls on the security agencies to be more proactive and re-strategise their security operations in order to nip this avoidable blood letting in the bud.

“Furthermore, ACF urges the Federal Government to set up a panel of inquiry into these incessant killings that have continued to bedevil most of the Northern states, with the hope that amicable solution would be found for common good.

PDP decries killings

The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) has described as sacrilegious and callous, the gruesome murder of two Catholic priests and worshippers in Benue State.

The party in a statement, yesterday, said the attack on innocent and defenseless Nigerians while they were worshipping was extremely wicked and cannot be justified under any guise whatsoever.

“The PDP is deeply worried over the unabated killings in Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, Kogi, Zamfara, Plateau, Bornu, Adamawa and other parts of the country where bloodletting has become daily occurrence.

“We urge our security agencies to take immediate steps towards apprehending the perpetrators and masterminds of this dastardly act and to ensure the safety of Nigerians, particularly in the troubled states,” the statement read in part.

Buratai Orders GOC 82 Div to relocate to Benue

Meanwhile, the General Officer Commanding 82 division Nigerian Army, Major-General Adamu Abubakar, yesterday, paid a visit to 77 Special Forces Battalion in Makurdi in connection with the latest security challenges in Benue state that saw the killing of two priests and several others by rampaging herdsmen.

A statement last night by Colonel Sagir Musa, Deputy Director, Army Public Relations said: “The GOC was briefed on the general security situation in the state by the Commanding officer of the battalion, Lt. Col. SS Mohammed.

“Thereafter, the GOC and his entourage visited the Commissioner of Police, Benue State, CP Fatai Owoseni, where he was further briefed on the security situation in the state.

“After the visits, the GOC used the occasion to visit and interact with the Deputy Governor of Benue state, Engr. Benson Abionu on the current security situation in the state.

“In his remarks during the visit, the Deputy Governor commended the Nigerian Army for the good work they are doing in different parts of the state.

“He informed the GOC that in his address to the people of the Naka community earlier in the day, he emphasized on the need for peaceful co-existence and the necessity for having Nigerian Army personnel in Benue communities.

The Deputy Governor said: “As a responsible government, we are investigating the Naka incident, attack on the Church and the latest deaths recorded in many areas of the state. If we find anybody incriminated, we will deal with such a person.”

Responding, the GOC said, ‘I am in the state on the instruction of the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. TY Buratai to interact with field Commanders and other heads of security agencies in Benue state with the aim of getting further credible situation report on the rising security challenges in the state with the view to checkmating the problems.’

WCC, ICC, others condemn attacks

Meantime, the mindless killing of two Catholic priests and 17 worshippers at the St. Ignatius Quasi Catholic Parish, Ukpok, Mbalom, Gwer East local government area of Benue State has continued to generate reactions from across the globe as the World Council of Churches (WCC), the International Christian Concern, among others, have condemned attacks across the world that have occurred during a violent week in which many have lost their lives or lost their loved ones.

According to the WCC General Secretary, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit on April 22, in Kabul, Afghanistan, a suicide bomber killed at least 60 people and wounded more than 120, including children, as they stood in line outside a Kabul voter-registration office.

“The next day, an attack occurred in Toronto, Canada, when a man steered a van down a crowded street, killing 10 people and leaving 15 others injured. He allegedly drove for nearly a mile, sometimes veering onto the sidewalk as he plowed a path of destruction.

“On April 24, church and government officials in Nigeria confirmed two Catholic priests, Fathers Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha, were among at least 19 people killed when herdsmen attacked St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Ayar-Mbalom, a community in Benue State. The attack occurred as people gathered for an early morning mass.

“Across the world, people who were living their daily lives, standing in line to register to vote, innocently walking in places that should be safe, attending worship, have been lost to their families and their communities,” said Tveit.

Meanwhile, Director of Social Communications at the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos, Rev. Monsignor Gabriel Osu in a reaction said: “Why on earth would some people attack a group of worshipers in a Church, on an early morning, hacking them to death? What manner of insanity and sadism would make some people open fire on priests celebrating mass in the house of God? What is their offence? Of what use is their death to the perpetrators? This is the height of evil and human callousness that should be condemned in all its entirety. This is not, and can never be acceptable in any sane society.

“Unfortunately ours is a society that has since lost its sanity and every sense of humanity. We have become a society numbed by the shedding of too much blood on a daily basis. We have lost touch with all that we once considered sacred and divine. For many, their consciences are no more active. They have been polluted and disfigured. They now think upside down. Their senses of morality have been thrown to the dogs and anything, everything goes as long as they derive some momentarily gains. What a pity.

“The recent murder of Rev. Fathers Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha, a Catechist and several worshippers at a Catholic Church in Makurdi is not only abominable, but a slap on the entire Christendom. It is a calculated effort to instigate hatred and create fear in the hearts of Christians. It is daring the divine. Unfortunately, those sponsoring these atrocities are being emboldened daily by the inability of the government and the law enforcement agencies to do the needful.”