

Fear grip Imo residents state as robbers, kidnappers lay siege

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These are not the best of times for residents and those passing through the territory known as Imo State. Armed robbery and kidnapping activities have become so frequent that people are now finding it extremely difficult to move about and transact their businesses with ease

ONE chance: Imo State is contending with activities of dare devil criminals, who pose as passengers in commercial vehicles plying the roads in the State. Investigations by Crime Alert also revealed that victims of “one chance” employed by some criminally minded drivers and their compatriots in crime have similarly increased.

Narrating her ordeal, a final year Economics student of Imo State University, Owerri, Miss Ijeoma (surname withheld), said she boarded an Orlu bound commercial bus at Warehouse, Orlu Road, Owerri, without knowing that three of the supposed passengers were armed robbers.

She said: “Immediately after the New Road Junction and before Umuaka, three passengers announced that they wanted to stop. The driver came to open the sliding door for them but the supposed passengers pointed pistols at him.” The frightened IMSU student added that the hoodlums beat the driver mercilessly, took over the vehicle and drove into a remote village.

Ijeoma recounted: “Somewhere along the unpaved village road, the vehicle sank in a muddy water and it was at this point that one of us braved it and ran away and alerted people in a nearby village. Before the villagers arrived, we were robbed.”

Kidnap of two prominent citizens: As people are trying to contend with the rising spate of criminality in the state, kidnapping is also taken its toll. The whereabouts and safety of the former Speaker of Imo State House of Assembly, Chief Godfrey Dikeocha, has become a source of serious worry to members of the immediate family, friends and compatriots. Dikeocha, who was kidnapped more than five weeks ago from his Oke Uvuru, Aboh Mbaise country home by a gang of dare devil gangsters, is yet to be released from captivity.

A family source said their initial assumption that the former Speaker’s kidnap was politically motivated, judging from the events that led to the ugly development has since been discarded. Differing but unconfirmed staggering figures have severally been bandied by the rumour mill in the state as amounts demanded by the Dikeocha’s captors.

Some people that spoke generally on the rising cases of kidnapping in the state, expressed worry that not much was being done to curb the menace. While people are fretting over that of Dikeocha, palpable confusion is currently pervading the peaceful rural community of Ndionyeagorom Village, Awa, Oguta local council area of Imo State, following the bizarre kidnap of their son, Ottih John Ottih.

Crime Alert gathered that Ottih, an engineer, retired senior staff of Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC, and currently one of the presidential aides on petroleum matters, attended the Sunday mass in his home church, Saint Michael's Catholic Church, Awa, before the hoodlums struck. The hoodlums who were suspected to be among the congregation that worshiped in the church, came in a metallic red coloured Jeep and numbered about four.



- Imo State Governor Rochas Okorocha (right) and Imo State Commissioner of Police Christopher Dego pondering over the crime rate in the State.

Ottih, according to eyewitness account, was later trailed to the mosque at Umuofor autonomous community, where they waylaid him and fired several shots at his car. "His younger brother, Ndubuisi, was hit in his right hand, while the soft-spoken engineer was immediately blindfolded and taken away in the kidnappers' Jeep", a villager told Crime Alert.

Use of sophisticated weapons: In the same vein, armed robbery operations in Imo State took a very dangerous dimension last Thursday, as dare devil hoodlums now operate with all manner of sophisticated weapons. The hoodlums defied the heavy rain of the day and shot their way into the highbrow Mbari Street, Owerri, branch of United Bank for Africa Plc. Four persons suspected to be bank workers were seriously wounded in the attack and all the money in the Automated Teller Machine, ATM, was carted away.

A journalist (names withheld) who witnessed the operation told Crime Alert that the armed robbers stormed the bank at about 7.00pm when the bank workers were still trying to balance their accounts. He said: "It was a brazen adventure by the robbers. From our hiding places, we heard the sound of all manner of sophisticated weapons, including what sounded like bombs."

Lamentations over rise in crime: Meanwhile, many people who spoke to Crime Alert after the ugly incident lamented over what they termed "the growing level of insecurity in the state." They were irked that "the robbers could conveniently execute an operation within a shouting distance from the Government House and State Police Headquarters, Owerri."

The respondents were of the opinion that if this could happen within Owerri municipality where the headquarters of all the security outfits are located, "it stands to reason that those living in the hinterlands must be passing through hell in the hands of hoodlums."

Imo State Police Command confirmed the brazen invasion of the commercial bank. The Police Public Relations Officer, PPRO, Mr. Samuel Oodee, in a telephone interview, confirmed that the dare devil armed robbers destroyed the Automated Teller Machine, ATM, located within the bank premises and carted away unspecified amount of cash lodged in the equipment. He said: "The robbers actually invaded the commercial bank. They succeeded in destroying the ATM located within the bank premises and carted away unspecified amount of money in the machine."

Although Mr. Oodee affirmed that a combined team of soldiers and policemen quickly stormed the area, following distress calls from the citizenry, the hoodlums still managed to escape with their loot.

He added that the security team gave the fleeing robbers a hot chase and they quickly abandoned their Bayelsa State registered Jeep in traffic gridlock along Okigwe Road, Owerri. "The police recovered the abandoned vehicle and when it was carefully searched; one dynamite was found in it. We have commenced serious investigation into the matter. No arrests have been made", Oodee said.

Answering another question, the PPRO said four persons wounded in the robbery operation were immediately taken to the Federal Medical Centre, Owerri, for treatment, adding that Governor Rochas Okorocha, the Commissioner of Police and the Commander 34 Field Artillery Brigade, Obinze have since visited the scene of crime.

Three feared dead in another attack: Just last weekend, about three citizens were feared dead when some armed gangsters suspected to be assassins and kidnappers stormed the rural Orogwe and Ogbaku communities in Owerri West and Mbaitoli local council areas of Imo State. It was equally gathered that the hoodlums kidnapped a lady and her two brothers, who returned from the United States of America to bury their mother this week.

In a similar development, hoodlums suspected to be assassins trailed one Mr. Charles Udochukwu Okpe, to Orogwe where they finally silenced him for life. The identities of the other slain citizens were not known at press time but a villager who preferred anonymity disclosed that the owner of Impetus filling station and a retired army captain (names withheld) was among those kidnapped by the armed hoodlums.

Police make progress: Meanwhile, about six suspected robbers were recently arrested and their 21-room hideout demolished at Umuofor, Egbu, Owerri North local council area of Imo State. Some guns and bags of substances suspected to be Indian hemp were recovered from the hideout of the suspects. The Special Assistant, SA, to Governor Rochas Okorocha for Owerri Zonal Security, Mr. Ugochukwu Onyeukwu, confirmed the development in a chat with journalists after the operation.

The SA, who later confirmed that the suspects have been handed over to the police for further investigation, also disclosed that they were on the trail of a man that allegedly duped a lady of the sum of N1.2 million on the pretext of renting a shop for her in Lagos.

Gov. Okorocha reacts: Reacting to some of the reported crimes in the state, Governor Rochas Okorocha, warned that his administration will not hesitate to summarily suspend the salary of any traditional ruler in Mbaitoli local council area of the state, who allows criminals to operate in his domain.

Okorocha, who read the riot act while addressing the royal fathers in Owerri, also said he was irked by the increasing cases of serious crimes like kidnapping, assassination, robbery, car snatching and the recent attack at the Divisional Police Headquarters, Nwaorieubi, by armed men. He enjoined the