

# TARABA MASSACRE, ARSON: 'Friends turned their guns on us, wiped out our kinsmen'

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**By Femi Bolaji**

You could perceive tension. All roads were deserted with few vehicles plying the Bali -Takum highway. The once peaceful atmosphere has been polluted by bloody conflict in recent weeks with influx of rural dwellers into Bali, headquarters of Bali Local Government Area (LGA) of Taraba State.

The unrest, which still causes apprehension for commuters and rural dwellers in that axis, is an escalation of the Tiv/Jukun crisis which reared its ugly head sometime last year in Wukari and has spread to other LGAs in Southern Taraba.

A major escalation of the crisis was its movement into villages of Bali LGA in Central Taraba from Donga LGA where the Tiv and Ichen (a part of Jukun) feud still rages.

Sunday Vanguard took a risky journey to speak with locals of some villages in Bali who were attacked by suspected Tiv militias.

**Ruins**

Some of the villages visited include Tunga, Maigoge, Kungana and Zagah under Suntai chieftdom, which are all situated along the highway leading to Takum.

On the assessment tour, numerous communities along that axis have been deserted while some houses were still on fire.

Various accounts of residents in the villages attacked corroborated that suspected Tiv militiamen crossed the river separating Donga from Bali to launch their offensive.

Five persons were reportedly killed in Maigoge while another four were said to have been slain in Tunga with several others injured.

Zagah, which did not record any casualty in the attacks, however, lost valuables as numerous houses were burnt.

Kungana village currently houses displaced persons from Kwasa village bordering Donga, and has no less than 1, 000 people taking refuge at Government Secondary School, Kungana.

The village head of Kwasa, Paul Kwasa, who was visibly emotional while speaking with Sunday Vanguard, said his village was in ruins.

According to him, his area was the first to be attacked before other villages in Suntai chieftdom were targeted.

### **Attack on Tunga**

The youth leader of Tunga village, Idris Baki, who lost his elder brother in the attack, narrated what happened.

Baki said: "My elder brother was killed during last Friday's attack. He has been the one advising us over the years, especially regarding the crisis in other villages.

"He always told us to exercise restraint because we are not part of the crisis going on in other villages. But around 3.30 am while we were all asleep, we started hearing gunshots.

"Everyone was confused and people took to their heels. When the tension subsided, we found that four people were killed including my elder brother who remained a father figure for me and my siblings.

"When we were attacked, I was chased with a gun by someone I know. He is a Tiv man and I even called him by his name which he answered.

## Vulnerable

"He told me that if I was truly a man, I shouldn't run but I had to flee to be alive. We actually don't know what made them descend on our village. We are appealing to government to help our community because currently, we are vulnerable."

Assistant Youth Leader in Maigoge, Danjuma Kekewa, in his account of what happened, said they were still in shock.

"We are amazed that the Tiv whom we have lived peacefully with over the years and accepted as one of us will today turn to fight us.

"It is more disturbing when they call us by our names during these attacks.

"During the attack on this village, five people were killed while 17 houses were burnt and over 23 people are injured."

The crown prince of Zagah, Bisawa Usman Zagah, in his own account, appealed for more deployment of security personnel in their communities.

He said: "We have come a long way with Tiv people and we have been living together peacefully. We have shown them love even more than our kinsmen.

"I still remember when the Tiv had issues with the people of Maigoge, and there was about to be a reprisal on some Tiv houses around Zagah, we had to prevail on the people of Maigoge to avert the reprisal and the issue was settled amicably.

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"But to our greatest surprise today, we are now living in fear of the Tiv people. You can see how scanty this village is currently. This is because many people, especially our women and children, ran away.

"The crisis between the Tiv and Ichen started in Donga local government area, not in Bali. The boundary between Donga and Bali is a river, but the Tiv militias left Donga and moved to Bali LGA under Suntai district to attack villages under Suntai chieftdom.

“They came here and destroyed our houses. The chief of Zagah’s house was destroyed and he is currently at the General Hospital, Takum receiving treatment.”

## **Security presence**

The paramount ruler of Suntai Chieftdom, Dauda Umar, who oversees all the attacked villages, pleaded for more security presence.

Umar said: “These are peasant farmers, unsupported farmers, very innocent and peace-loving citizens of this country.

“They have never had any reason to wake up one day to find their brother’s being killed like this.

“This chieftdom has lost over 40 people in coordinated attacks that were launched on Kwasa, Dadinkowa, Gada Koshi, Danjuma Fali, Lafia Kwasa, Tunga and Maigoge. “Food items were also destroyed or carted away by the hoodlums. “We thank Governor Darius Ishaku who saw our tears and told the chairman of Bali to form an all-important committee to bring lasting peace to these areas.

“We are begging government to do more by sending more security personnel to this place. “We have also appealed to the people of this chieftdom not to take the law into their hands, but they should be able to defend their homes.”

## **Reprisal**

When contacted, President General of the Tiv Cultural and Social Association in Taraba State, Goodman Dahida, said the attacks must have been a reprisal.

He said: “These boys whenever they go and attack, you will know that something must have happened because they don’t just attack like that.

“Most of the Tiv people have been displaced from their villages and it is either the Jukun go there looting or killing.

“Anything can happen in a crisis situation and you shouldn’t expect that other people should not attack. That is just the truth about it.

“The government should do the needful but they are not doing anything.”

## **Govt doing much**

Responding to the allegation, Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to Governor Ishaku, Bala Dan Abu, said government had done much and will keep doing more to ensure the crisis ends.

“The state government is unhappy about the recent outbreak of the crisis in Central Taraba communities. We are appealing to all the people who are involved in this crisis to give peace a chance”, Abu said.

“As a government, we are interested in peace, and we are not going into the nitty gritty of who did what.

“Government has taken prompt action to ensure there is no longer an outbreak of attacks and killings in those areas by directing security agencies to move into the affected area immediately and pre-empt the kind of attacks we have seen recently.

“Government is not going to relent till peace is finally achieved between the Tiv and the Jukun.”

### **Security meeting**

The Chairman of Bali LGA, Musa Mahmud, also said there is a humanitarian crisis in his domain.

Explaining how it all started, he said: “The crisis between the Tiv and Ichen in Donga LGA escalated to Kwasa village under Bali LGA.

“I visited Kwasa when it was raided and the level of destruction there is nothing to be happy about. I communicated my findings to the state government so as to assist me in taking action.

“The crisis further extended to Zagah, Tunga and Maigoge where people were killed. It made me summon an emergency security meeting where a committee for peace and conflict resolution was inaugurated.

“And from preliminary findings, all accusing fingers were pointed at the Tiv. And that is why we reached out to the Tiv leaders who sent a representative to the security meeting.

“When the crisis initially broke out here, I had over 3, 000 displaced people under my care. I reached out to the state governor who assisted the local government with relief materials which has been distributed to the displaced persons”.

### **Further attacks**

Taraba State Police Command also said its men have moved into the affected communities to avert further attacks.

Spokesman for the Command, DSP David Misal, said, "The Commissioner of Police, Ahmed Azare, condemns in strong terms the unnecessary killing by criminal elements and called on them to desist from that.

"Presently, the Commissioner of Police has deployed adequate patrol teams and has directed the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of operations to supervise activities in those areas to ensure that the situation is brought under control."

Vanguard