

How my son died in police custody, 70-yr-old woman tells Abia Panel of inquiry

●SARS officers hanged, tortured me with pressing iron for not offering them N500,000, witness tells Ekiti panel

By Ugochukwu Alaribe & Rotimi Ojomoyela

A 70-year-old woman, Mrs Charity Ohalete, yesterday told the Abia State panel on police brutality, extrajudicial killings and related matters how her son died in police detention in December 2018.

Also yesterday, a 30-year-old man, Mr Ayotomiwa Elegbeleye, told the Ekiti State Judicial Panel of Inquiry into allegations of police brutality how he was repeatedly tortured by SARS after being arrested from his house in Ikere-Ekiti on January 7, 2020.

Narrating her ordeal, the 70-year-old woman said her son, Onyekachi Ohalete Ugwuero was arrested at the railway area of Uzuakoli by policemen from the Uzuakoli police station, Bende council area, but denied access to his family who took food to him.

Ohalete disclosed that a few days later, her son was found dead in the cell when she went to visit him and insisted on seeing him.

She lamented that the Police chased her away from

the cell while Onyekachi's corpse was taken to the mortuary without allowing the family members to see it.

In her words: "When I came to see my son, I was initially told that the person with the key to the cell was absent, but later the key was broken and my son, Onyekachi, was found dead in the cell. They chased me away from the cell and took Onyekachi's corpse to the mortuary without his family seeing it. The family was made to pay N100,000 before seeing the corpse."

In its defence, the Police claimed that an autopsy performed on the corpse, which Mrs Ohalete was not aware of, showed that the deceased committed suicide with a rope from his trouser.

The police also stated that the deceased was arrested for stealing a police property. However, the Police did not produce a petition or arrest warrant to the family.

Speaking before the Ekiti state Judicial Panel of Inquiry into allegations of police brutality, yesterday, 30-year-old man, Mr Ayotomiwa Elegbeleye, narrated

how he was arrested by eight SARS operatives in his house in Ikere-Ekiti on January 7, 2020, at about 11:55 pm and taken to their custody where he was repeatedly tortured.

Elegbeleye said he was hanged with a rod in the custody while the officers tortured him with pressing iron for twenty-three days over his failure to offer N500,000 requested for him to be released.

During the sitting, the complainant, who was brought from the Correctional Center to the panel, showed members of the panel the bodily injuries he sustained from the hot pressing iron when he was in their custody.

He said, "I was arrested by the SARS operatives around 11:55 pm at my house in Ikere-Ekiti without them telling me the crime I committed. That night, I was taken to their office they beat and tortured me with pressing iron that I should confess being an armed robber.

I was hanged up with a rod. I gasp for breath begging them to release me but they said I will only be released with payment of N500,000.

"After 23 days in their custody

and with serious bodily injuries, they took me to the police hospital in Oke-Isa when they felt I might die due to my worsening health condition."

Elegbeleye, who maintained that he was never involved in any criminal activity, pleaded with the panel to investigate his case with a bid of releasing him from the prison.

"I come to the panel for them to assist me in getting justice from this suffering I am passing through for an offence I don't know anything about and I need urgent medicare now because I am having serious difficulty in breathing due to the manner I was beaten by the SARS officers," he said.

However, counsel to the police said a case of alleged conspiracy, murder and armed robbery against the complainant is currently before the State High Court.

Counsel to the complainant, Layi, argued that his client is before the panel to seek justice over the brutality he suffered in the hands of the SARS operatives.

Chairman of the panel, Justice Cornelius Akintayo (ret'd) adjourned the matter to December 3rd for the continuation of hearing, calling on the parties to present their witnesses on the adjournment date.