

FIGHT OVER FARMLAND IN A'IBOM: 5 beheaded, 70-yr-old pastor murdered, houses of ex-IGP, lawmaker razed

June 20, 2021



One of the affected houses.

***Warring party petitions DSS, as Dep gov, SSG sue for peace**

By Harris Emanuel

“My house was burnt down and I lost everything I had worked for. I am like a fugitive in my homestead. My children are scattered everywhere because we don’t anywhere to stay as a family.”

These were the words of Monday Effiong, a carpenter whose house was among those destroyed when armed youths allegedly from Uko Nteghe, a neighbouring village, invaded Uko Akpan in Enwang, headquarters of Mbo local government area of Akwa Ibom State, over disputed farmlands.

Monday’s words echo the pains, anguish, sorrow and trauma many people in the Uko Akpan Enwang community are passing through as a result of the attacks which they described as unprovoked.

When this reporter visited the area, some of the houses there had been overtaken by weeds and tall grasses. Gone was the vibrancy for which it was famed. The town seemed desolate and it was hard to believe this was the once bubbly community.

READ ALSO: [Don’t ignore Southeast, S’West agitations — Akwa Ibom Rep warns Presidency](#)

Although calm may have returned to the warring communities, a pall of uncertainty and utter suspicion is, however, hanging menacingly over it like a sword of Damocles.

The conflict reportedly resulted in the killing of no fewer than 15 persons while four were beheaded and 25 wounded, according to documents obtained by Sunday Vanguard.

Several houses were either vandalized or burnt down even as shops looted and thousands of people forced to flee their homes.

Iconic structures such as the residences of a former Inspector General of Police, the late Sir Etim Inyang, a former member, House of Representatives, the late Chief Martin Effiong, and Clan Head, Ovong Baasey Atabia, among others, were torched by the rampaging invaders, even as death toll included a 70-year-old catechist of Catholic Church, Sir Emmanuel Nkuda.

The attacks not only provoked outrage across the state, they also heightened tension in the oil rich state.

It was gathered that before the attacks, cases of rape of Enwang women in their farmlands were reported to law enforcement agents, but the victims alleged that they did nothing.

Inter-communal issue is not new in the area as clashes between Uko Akai, Uko Nteghe and Uko Akai, and Uko Akpan, which centered on the ownership of common family farmlands, festered over the years. And the issue, in recent times, assumed a long drawn and refractory history of bitterness and bloodbath.

According to reports, each side had sought redress in the court of justice but rather than conflict abating there were more hostilities.

Quest for justice, peace

Documents obtained by Sunday Vanguard show that four judgments had been delivered on the disputed land which directed all parties involved to restrict themselves to the cultivation of only their ancestral farmlands.

“After the several judgments, everyone thought the ghost of the conflict had been laid to rest, but the ensuing period was characterized by lack of faith, misunderstanding and utter suspicion on both sides”, an indigene of the area who spoke on condition of anonymity said.

The source alluded to the resolution by a former Oro monarch, HRH, the late E. O. Isemin, who stated that “the age long rights of ownership of the units’ farmland should still hold without hindrance and that no unit should trespass, sell or cede any portion of their common heritage without the concurrence of the other in mutual agreement.”

Notably, a judgment of a High Court in Suit No HOR/1/13/2013, delivered by Justice Theresa Obot on February 19, 2020, required Uko Akai Uko Akpan in Enwang and Uko Akai Uko Nteghe in Uda, as plaintiff and defendant respectively, to submit themselves to the Council of Oro Traditional Rulers to administer traditional oath to enable each party continue to farm and enjoy their original farmlands as a result of their common patrimony.

The judgment also stated “that the Uko Akai Uko Akpan people and Uko Akai Uko Nteghe people shall continue to share and cultivate their communal land as they have been doing since time immemorial.”

Based on the court ruling, the Council of Oro Traditional Rulers was said to have, on three occasions, invited the parties involved for the administration of the traditional oath, but the Uko Akai Uko Nteghe community allegedly refused to comply, a document obtained by this reporter stated.

Lawmakers, Oron Union, traditional rulers wade in

Worried by the renewed hostilities, a Joint Panel on Peace and Conflict Resolution of Oron Union and Council of Oro Traditional Ruler (COTR), on March 5, convened a meeting aimed at resolving the conflict.

President General, Oron Union, Bishop Etim Ante, who was upset by the wanton destruction and killings, warned that it could snowball into a conflagration.

“Oro is concerned and, if the crisis is not checked, it would affect the entire Oro nation. You should not have any doubt about the capability of COTR and Oron Union to handle the matter amicably. We are not subservient to any authority”, he said.

Paramount Ruler of Urue Offong/Oruko, HRH Effiong Matthew Unanaowo, corroborated him, stressing, “The crisis is having a psychological effect on the traditional institution. We, therefore, appeal for calm to avert a major catastrophe. Fight will not solve the intractable problem. I know that truth will definitely prevail”.

Also, a Joint Committee on Security, Youth and Sports and Boundary and Conflicts Resolution of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, on March 16, 2021, invited the warring parties to appear before it.

The invitation was sequel to the motion on matter of urgent public importance tabled by the member representing Mbo State Constituency, Hon. Effiong Johnson, on the floor of the House.

Spokesman for the Enwang community, Chief Ita Awak, using power point, highlighted the conflict, underlining past efforts at reconciliation: “Uko Nteghe intransigently refused to comply and this, to all intents and purposes, is the why and how this issue has degenerated to this current state.”

The former Commissioner for Information noted that “in the course of time, they have extended the dispute beyond Uko Akai to other ancestral farmlands of Enwang community which include Uko Ateni, Uko Urua-Orok”, a ploy to sack his community from its ancestral land.

The presentation, titled, ‘The unprovoked invasion and plot by Uko Nteghe Uda people to sack Enwang people from their ancestral land’, was signed by the Clan Head, Ovong Bassey E. Atabia; President General, Enwang Development Union, Ovong Effiong Abia;

Secretary General, EDU, Comrade Eteyen Imisim; Council Chairman, Ovong Okon Omoh; and Council Secretary, Chief Joseph Anwana, .

Other community leaders who endorsed the document are, Engineer Ita Awak, Engineer Anietie Effiong, Barrister Effiong Abia and National President, Enwang Youth Council, Emmanuel Effah.

However, leader of Uda delegation, E. O. Moses, alia Abia the Rock, at the meeting, prayed the committee to adjourn sitting to enable his team get more facts as they were not prepared, but insisted that the farmlands in dispute belong to them.

Appeal

Akwa Ibom State Deputy Governor, Mr. Moses Ekpo, whose office is charged with the onus of settling boundary issue, equally summoned a meeting in his office where he expressed displeasure over the crisis which he acknowledged had claimed innocent lives and property.

“I called this meeting as a warning because you lose so much anytime you inflict yourself with crises”, Ekpo said.

“Destroying lives and properties because of land which originally belongs to God and only held in trust by government is wrong.”

Secretary to the State Government, Dr. Emmanuel Ekuwem, a native of the area, who visited the two communities, also lamented about the conflict and called on them to resort to the status quo ante.

Meanwhile, no fewer than five suspected militants arrested in connection with the carnage are facing prosecution, but the police, in a statement by Akwa Ibom State Police Command Public Relations Officer, Macdon Odiko, urged the political class to step in and resolves the conflict.

Be that as it may, the Enwang community has petitioned the Department of State Service, DSS, over the alleged killing of her people.

Titled, ‘A petition and passionate appeal for the investigation of the unprovoked invasion and attacks on the Enwang community, headquarters of Mbo LGA of Akwa Ibom State by their Uko Nteghe Uda neighbours’, it was signed by the National Coordinator of the Society for the Promotion of Human Rights and Justice, Mr. Udo Eke-Okon.

“We hereby most respectfully appeal to the DG of DSS to use his good office to direct a thorough investigation into the matter with the aim of bringing the perpetrators and their sponsors to justice.

“This is the only way to bring about closure of this sad event and the ugly scars it has left in the psyche and memory of Enwang people”.

They also want government to compel the people of Uko Nteghe Uda to submit themselves to the administration of the traditional oath as ordered by the Oron High Court in its judgment as this is only the way to end the conflict.

Vanguard News Nigeria

Disclaimer

Comments expressed here do not reflect the opinions of vanguard newspapers or any employee thereof.