

Seven feared dead, as smugglers engage Customs in gun duel in Ogun

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By James Ogunnaike

About seven persons were feared dead, while unspecified numbers of persons sustained varying degrees of injuries when hoodlums suspected to be smugglers engaged operatives of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) in a gun battle on Saturday in Ogun State.

The incident, which occurred at Kobape village, along Abeokuta – Sagamu expressway in the Obafemi – Owode local government area of the state was allegedly ignited by suspected smugglers who unleashed terror on Customs operatives from the Federal Operation Unit (F.O.U) who were on routine enforcement operation in the area.

The bloody clash, which started around 5p.m on Saturday evening, left commuters and motorists stranded for more than two-hours when vehicular movements were halted along the expressway as motorists deserted the road for fear of being hit by stray bullets.

It was gathered that the NCS personnel had around 3p.m on Saturday intercepted some vehicles being used by the smugglers to convey large quantities of smuggled bags of foreign rice to an unknown

destination, during which one of the drivers was equally arrested and whisked away.

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An eye witness told newsmen that troubles started when the Customs' F.O.U operatives refused to release the arrested driver, and as well rejected the settlement advances made by leaders of the smugglers.

The refusal of the NCS operatives however, allegedly infuriated the smugglers, who later turned the bargaining to violence, shooting one of the Customs personnel to death.

It was further gathered that both sides suffered numbers of casualties in the melee that later ensued as three (3) operatives were dropped dead, while four members of the smuggling syndicate also lost their lives.

It took the intervention of the combined security operatives, which included personnel of the Nigerian Army and the police to dislodge the smugglers in an intervention led by the Commissioner of Police in Ogun Command, Lanre Bankole.

In his reaction, the Public Relations Officer, FOU Zone A, Theophilus Duniya

two of the attackers lost their lives in the fracas, while two Customs operatives were wounded.

Duniya in a statement made available to newsmen in Abeokuta said, "Customs patrol team from Federal Operations Unit Zone A, Lagos was attacked without provocation on Saturday afternoon during an operation along Shagamu Inter-change in Ogun State".

"The patrol team had intercepted twelve vehicles of different kinds, laden with bags of foreign parboiled rice and were on their way to the government warehouse before smugglers mobilized themselves with the support of their sympathizers and attacked the team with dangerous weapons".

"During the exchange of gun fire, two of the attackers lost their lives and one suspect was arrested. Out of 12 vehicles in the convoy of the smugglers, our operatives were able to leave with 4 of them laden with smuggled foreign parboiled rice".

"The arrested suspect and the seizure have been brought to the Unit Headquarters, Ikeja".

He added that the Ag. Controller of the Unit, Hussein K Ejibunu frowned at the avoidable loss of lives due to the unprovoked attack.

He has ordered full scale Investigations into the matter to apprehend other fleeing suspects with their smuggled wares.

He cautioned the youths to eschew violent confrontations with government operatives and be law abiding at all times

He added that such violent attacks will never deter or threaten customs operatives from carrying out their legitimate duties.