

METRO

## Owo Church Attack: Over 50 killed; I'll make them pay — Akeredolu

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Bombs exploded and bullets rained at St. Francis Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State, yesterday afternoon by gunmen and at the end, 50 worshippers laid dead, signalling the arrival of massacre of the innocent in the South.

Those killed included family members, children, and pregnant women.

Another eyewitness said the gunmen, who disguised as worshippers, detonated explosives suspected to dynamite and later opened fire on members of the church.

One of the priests at the church, Rev. Father Andrew Abayomi, who narrated how the church was attacked, said the gunmen also bombed the church.

## **How we were attacked — Priest**

Abayomi said: “We were about to round off service. I had even asked people to start leaving when we started hearing gunshots from different angles.

“We hid inside the church but some people had left when the attack happened. We locked ourselves in the church for 20 minutes. When we heard that they had left, we opened the church and rushed victims to the hospital.”

Vanguard however, gathered that the killers, four in number, arrived the church a few minutes before 11am in Volkswagen Golf vehicle which was parked at the entrance of the church.

The corpses were deposited at the Federal Medical Centre, Owo, the Catholic Hospital and private hospitals in the town.

## **‘Attackers were kidnappers’**

Also narrating how the attack was carried out, a church member, Kehinde Ogunkorode, told Vanguard that about five gunmen stormed the church during service and shot members.

Ogunkorode said: “It was like a movie; they invaded the church and shot indiscriminately. Several people were killed, including children and women. It was when they wanted to abduct the priest that they threw dynamite into the church.”

Another source confirmed that no fewer than 25 corpses were moved out of the church, with many casualties lying at the Federal Medical Centre, Owo, for medical attention.

“The congregants were caught unawares by the killers. They also used explosives but many were shot.”

## **Herdsmen behind the killings — Ondo lawmaker**

Meanwhile, the lawmaker representing Owo, Constituency II in the House of Assembly, Olayemi Adeyemi, alleged yesterday that those who attacked St Francis Catholic Church were armed herdsmen of Fulani extraction.

Adeyemi, who spoke to newsmen in Owo, said: “The gunmen invaded the religious premises with explosives which they detonated before opening live rounds on members while church service was ongoing. “The attack was a reprisal aimed at sending a message to Governor Rotimi Akeredolu who chased away violent Fulani pastoralists from the area.

“Locals around the church premises saw the attackers who were on the run after unleashing the horrific act on the church. They were armed herdsmen of Fulani extraction, a tribe accused of spear-heading insecurity across the country.”

## **NMA calls for blood donations**

Reacting to the attack yesterday, the Nigerian Medical Association, NMA, urged Nigerians in the affected area of Ondo State to go to hospitals where the injured were being treated to donate blood to save lives.

In a statement by its President, Dr Uche Ojinmah, the NMA said: “We received with sadness the news of the wanton killing of innocent Nigerians and abduction of some citizens at Owo in Ondo State by yet-to-be identified gunmen.

“The recurrent shedding of innocent blood in our dear country has been going on for far too long and it is the position of the Nigerian Medical Association that explanations, condemnations and reassurances are no longer comforting.

“The NMA, hereby, calls for quick intervention by our governments and security agencies to protect the lives and properties of Nigerians in every part of this nation.

“The Nigerian Medical Association commiserates with the government and good people of Ondo State over the loss of lives and prays for quick recovery of those injured.

“We appeal to Nigerians in the affected area of Ondo State to kindly go to the hospitals where the injured are being treated to donate blood to save lives.

“We call on all doctors in Ondo State and the environs to mobilize themselves to participate in the treatment of the injured. NMA also calls for the release in good health of those abducted.”

## **More details later — Ondo Police**

When contacted, the Ondo Police Command declined to give the number of people killed in the attack.

Spokesperson of the Command, Funmi Odunlami, said: “Ondo State Police Command is aware of the attack at Owo. We will give you the details of the event later. We want to urge the people of Ondo State to be calm as all security apparati are currently active to ensure peace in this area.”

The attack generated reactions from President Muhammadu Buhari, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr Femi Gbajabiamila; Governor Rotimi Akeredolu of Ondo State, the Aare Onakakanfo of Yorubaland, Iba Gani Adams; the pan-Yoruba socio-political organization, Afenifere and leader of Ilana Omo Oodua, Professor Banji Akintoye. They all condemned the dastardly act.

## **Eternal sorrow awaits perpetrators —Buhari**

In his reaction, President Muhammadu Buhari, who expressed shock and sadness over the heinous killing of the worshippers, said eternal sorrow awaited those behind the killing, both here on earth and in the hereafter.

The President, in a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Chief Femi Adesina, said: “Only fiends from the nether region could have conceived and carried out such dastardly act, eternal sorrow awaits them both on earth here, and ultimately in the hereafter.

“No matter what, this country shall never give in to evil and wicked people, and darkness will never overcome light. Nigeria will eventually win.”

He mourned the dead, condoled with their families, the Catholic Church, and the government of Ondo State, charging emergency agencies to swing into action, and bring succour to the wounded.”

## **I’ll make culprits pay — Akeredolu**

Condemning the attack, Governor Akeredolu of Ondo State, who said he had to cut short his national assignment in Abuja, vowed to make the perpetrators pay.

Akeredolu, in a statement by his Chief Press Secretary, Richard Olatunde, said: “We shall never bow to the machinations of heartless elements in our resolve to rid our state of criminals.

“Governor Oluwarotimi Akeredolu, SAN, is deeply saddened by the unprovoked attack and killing of innocent people of Owo, worshipping at St Francis Catholic Church, Owa-Iuwa Street, on Sunday.

“The vile and satanic attack is a calculated assault on the peace-loving people of Owo Kingdom, who have enjoyed relative peace over the years.

“It is a black Sunday in Owo. Our hearts are heavy. Our peace and tranquility have been attacked by the enemies of the people. This is a personal loss, an attack on our dear state.

“I have spoken to the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Ondo, Most Reverend Jude Arogundade, who is currently on his way to Owo. Similarly, I have had to cut short my party’s national assignment in Abuja and visit Owo immediately.

“This is an unexpected development. I am shocked to say the least. Nevertheless, we shall commit every available resource to hunt down these assailants and make them pay. We shall never bow to the machinations of heartless elements in our resolve to rid our state of criminals.

“I commiserate with my people in Owo, particularly families of those who lost their lives to this ugly and unfortunate attack.

“I urge our people to remain calm and vigilant. Do not take laws into your hands. I have spoken to the heads of the security agencies. I have equally been assured that security operatives would be deployed to monitor and restore normalcy to Owo kingdom.”

## ‘Nigeria at war’

Bishop of Ondo Diocese, Jude Arogundade, described the killings as total madness, adding that Nigeria was at war.

Arogundade spoke after conducting Governor Rotimi Akeredolu and other security chiefs in the state round the church premises after the attack.

The cleric said: “This is madness, all over the world there is nowhere people will plan to come and kill babies, children, husband and wife worshipping on a special day, the Pentecost day. It is unbelievable that somebody will come and the intention is to kill everybody in that church. Those who were running out were being shot from outside, those who were inside were being shot inside.

“They threw dynamite to blow off the altar down to the sanctuary. This kind of desecration can only be done by evil ones.

What the world should know is that Nigeria is at war and this kind of war is directed at civilians and I don’t know what point someone is trying to make with this kind of evil but whatever point they intended to make they have not made any point and they have not achieved anything, unfortunately.”

## ‘Nigeria needs divine intervention’

In its reaction, the Catholic Church condemned the armed attack, saying Nigeria needed the divine intervention of God to overcome its troubles. In a statement by the Director, Social Communication, Ondo Diocese, Rev. Fr. Augustine Ikwu, said: “It is so sad to say that while the Holy Mass was going on, men of unknown origin, wielding guns attacked St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Owo, Ondo State.

“Many are feared dead and many others injured and the Church violated. The identity of the perpetrators remains unknown while the situation has left the community devastated. “At this point in the history of our dear country, Nigeria, we need God’s ultimate intervention to restore peace and tranquility.

“Meanwhile, all the Priests in the parish are safe and none was kidnapped as the social media has it. The Bishop of the Diocese is also with them at this trying time.”

## Review security architecture — CAN

Expressing concern over the unprovoked attacks and killings in worship centres across the country, President of Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN, Rev. Samson Ayokunle, urged President Muhammadu Buhari to reorganise the security agencies and “stop the recycling of terrorists in the name of de-radicalising programme.”

Ayokunle, in a statement by his Special Assistant, Pastor Adebayo Oladeji, said: “We condemn the unprovoked attacks and killing of several innocent worshippers at St Francis Catholic Church, Owa-Iuwa Street, Owo, and called on the security agencies to apprehend the perpetrators of the dastardly criminality.



“We are once again reiterating our quest for a total overhauling of the security architecture and are asking President Muhammadu Buhari to stop the recycling of those criminals and terrorists in the name of de-radicalising programme. If the programme is not counter-productive, how come the criminalities are always on the increase and nowhere is safe again?

“This menace of insecurity has got out of hand and is embarrassingly sore. Criminals are operating with impunity all over the country and unfortunately, our government appears to be so busy with the 2023 general election that it has no time for the unending killings in the country.”

## **Gbaja demands immediate action**

Also reacting, speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila, demanded immediate action from government against the killing.

Gbajabiamila, who condemned the dastardly act, described those behind the attack as enemies of the state who must be fished out and dealt with accordingly.

In a statement by his media aide, Lanre Lasisi, yesterday, the speaker said the incessant attacks on innocent Nigerians across the country must be brought to an end.

He challenged security agencies to double their efforts in bringing the insecurity in the country under control, especially by stepping up intelligence gathering to halt such attacks before they occurred.

## **Oyetola flays attack**

Governor Adegboyega Oyetola of Osun State described the attack as a terrorist attack, saying the attack as barbaric and an unprovoked aggression against innocent people.

Oyetola said: “An attack of this nature is totally barbaric, wicked and an act of unprovoked aggression against innocent people. It is both mean and inhumane to turn the sacred sanctuary of a church to a killing field on a Sunday morning.

“While expressing sympathy to the families of those killed in the attack, and especially to the Catholic Diocese of Ondo and the government of Ondo State, we are also assuring Governor Rotimi Akeredolu and the government of Ondo State of our support in any and every way possible.”

## **Affront on Church of Christ — Okowa**

In his condemnation of the attack, Governor Ifeanyi Okowa of Delta State said the attack is not just barbaric but an affront on the Church of Christ.

While condemning the dastardly act, Okowa in a statement by his Chief Press Secretary, Mr Olisa Ifeajika, said: “We join all well-meaning Nigerians to condemn this unprovoked attack at a worship centre and call on security agencies to intensify efforts towards arresting the culprits and bringing them to book.

“The attack is not just barbaric but an affront on the Church of Christ, and we stand in solidarity with the Ondo people at this trying time.

“My profound condolences also go to the families of the deceased, the entire Catholic Church and the people of Owo Kingdom.”

## **It's war on Yorubaland — Afenifere**

Reacting, the pan-Yoruba socio-political organisation, Afenifere, said the Owo attack was a direct attack on the Yoruba race.

Afenifere's General Secretary, Mr Sola Ebiseni, in a statement, lamented that the present administration was “helpless and irresponsible in securing life and property, an irrefutable sign of the failure of the Nigerian state.”

Ebiseni said: “The horrendous incident at the St. Francis Catholic Church in the ancient Yoruba city of Owo, Ondo State, where scores of worshippers were killed by herdsmen wielding most sophisticated weapons is not just an attack on the Church and the psyche of all decent people all over the world but a deliberate show at testing the self-defence strength of the Yoruba people in resisting the importation of the horrible culture of violence into our land.

“In all of these, the Federal Government of Nigeria, which against federal precepts, continues to monopolise security and its architecture, have proven most helpless and irresponsible in securing life and property, an irrefutable sign of the failure of the Nigerian state.

“We say in clear terms that the noiseless glides of the Amotekun is no sign of fear and that this stamp on the tail of the viper is one too many.”

## **It's declaration of war —Akintoye**

On his part, leader of the Ilana Omo Oodua Worldwide, IOOW, Professor Banji Akintoye, described the deadly attack as a declaration of war against the Yoruba people.

Responding through the Communications Secretary of IOOW, Mr. Maxwell Adeleye, Akintoye urged Governor Akeredolu, to declare an emergency against the activities of Fulani herdsmen in the state with immediate effect.

He said: “We have stated it very expressly that the Yoruba people need to negotiate their exit from Nigeria as a matter of urgency but our Partisan Political Actors in Yorubaland never took us serious. We warned them that there's fire on the mountain but we were mocked because of their personal aggrandizement.

“Today, we have all been encircled, most especially, in Lagos. For herdsmen to have the effrontery of bombarding a church in Yorubaland to kill about 85 people shows that we are now in danger.

“My urgent advice to Governor Akeredolu is to pick up the gauntlet and declare an emergency against the activities of all Fulani herdsmen in the state with immediate effect.”

## **Perpetrators should be apprehended — Tinubu**

On his part, a presidential aspirant on the platform of the All Progressives Congress, APC, Bola Tinubu expressed shock over the attack, maintaining that perpetrators of the dastardly attack should be apprehended.

“No one can discern the darkness in the mind of those that would kill people who were merely engaged in the harmless practice of their faith. The only thing that can be said for sure is that these perpetrators are evil and that they should be subjected to the full measure of the law and justice.

“This violent attack has shocked the conscience of the nation and shattered the peace of this ancient town. It has saddened our hearts beyond what words can say. However, those who did this have made a terrible mistake. They think they can break our collective spirit and our will to live in peace and with compassion to all regardless of faith. What they have done will not pull us apart. We must unite so that together we extinguish this evil from our nation. We owe it to ourselves and to those who lost their lives in this heinous attack.”

## **Attack threatens Nigeria’s foundations — Gani Adams**

Aare-Ona-Kakanfo of Yorubaland, Iba Gani Adams, in a statement by his Special Assistant on Media, Mr Kehinde Aderemi, said the incident was ungodly and capable of threatening the foundation and existence of Nigeria.

He described the perpetrators of the gory attack as evil, saying they have sinned against God and should be ready to face the wrath of God.

His words: “Cases of Boko Haram and bandits and other criminal elements always attacking churches and mosques have simply showed the failures of government. It has also exposed the crass incompetence of Nigeria’s leaders and the security apparatus.

“Reports at my disposal showed clearly that the attackers disguised as worshippers, planted an explosive device within the church premises and carried out their evil attack on innocent worshippers.

“The Federal Government must rise to its responsibility, begin thorough investigation into the attack and also bring the perpetrators of this gory incident to book.”

## **Amaechi condemns attack**

In his reaction, presidential aspirant on the platform of the All Progressives Congress, APC, Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, condemned the attack, saying: “I feel so sad and livid that these criminals are so emboldened to carry out these barbaric attacks on the people in broad day light.

“Our security agencies have to put heads together and smoke out these monsters and ensure they are punished, immobilized and totally flushed out.

“May the souls of the departed rest in the bosom of the Lord. I also pray for the families, the church, the people and the Government of Ondo State to find strength in the midst of the sorrow and pain,” Amaechi said.

## **Get the killers — Catholic Bishops**

The Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria, CBCN, urged government to intensify the efforts to hunt down the attackers and bring them to book.



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President of CBCN and Archbishop-elect of Owerri, Most Revd Lucius Ugorji, said in a statement: “I received the news of the bloody attack unleashed on innocent worshippers at St. Francis Catholic Church Owo in the Diocese of Ondo on Pentecost Sunday with great shock and sadness.

“We call on government to hunt them down and bring them to book. If government fails to act decisively on such a grave matter, it would be encouraging the descent of anarchy on our nation.

“It should rise to its primary responsibility of securing the life and property of its citizens. The world is watching us! Above all, God is also watching us.”

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