

The South South LENS

EMOHUA-KALABARI FEDERAL ROAD: Most dreaded motorway in Rivers

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SOMETIME this year, during gunmen ambushed and attacked soldiers on security duties on the ramshackle Emohua-Kalabari Road in Rivers State, killing one, and injuring two of them.

The attack occurred on a bridge between Asari-Toru, Emohua Local Government Areas. The Military authorities in anger withdrew soldiers from duty on the road, and it has remained so to date.

The attack on soldiers was not an isolated incident. The bandits operating on the dangerous federal road, riddled with potholes and gullies, gruesomely murdered a bus driver, Salvation Taylor-Harry, who they abducted with eight passengers in his bus on September 3.

The Emohua-Kalabari road has become so notorious that drivers plying Port-Harcourt to Degema/Abonema City Local Government Area and Choba Park in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, not too long, boycotted the road. Few drivers who tried to disrupt the protest had their vehicles seized.

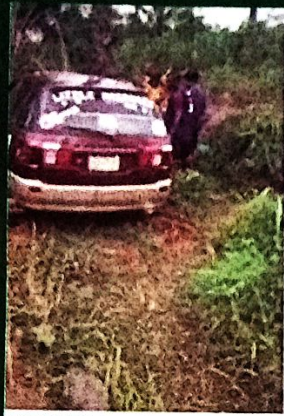
The week after the Taylor-Harry incident, the gunmen abducted another five passengers even after the Police Public Relations Officer, Rivers State, Police Command, SP Grace Iringe-Koko, assured that the security agency had mobilized adequately on the road to forestall further occurrence.

Motorists' alleged police officers at the few checkpoints on the road were only interested in the money they collected from taxi drivers and illegal refiners of petroleum products.

Emohua-Kalabari road stretches across Emohua, Degema, Asari-Toru, and Akuku Toru Local Government Areas in Rivers State.

On the Emohua communities' axis, there are several points that have long served as dens of criminals where criminals killed and got ransom from victims of repeated robberies and abductions. At the peak of militancy, from the Kalabari axis, militant groups also troubled that route. It has been quiet for some time, until the latest resurgence of abductions, a regular Kalabari traveler on the road told Saturday Vanguard.

"You find that the topography of the area is also a problem. There is water not too far from the road. Therefore, when they (gunmen) hit, they take the victims on boats. We identified the particular spots where they take people from Elibrada, to Rumuodoku, another stakeholder disclosed.



• Wrecked commercial vehicle after gunmen attacked and abducted 8 passengers, leaving the driver dead



• Emohua FG boss, Lloyd, and Akuku-Toru LG counterpart, David Sekibo, during an inspection on the road

Others see a link between the renewed crime on the road and unabated oil theft and illegal refineries along the water route in the area.

"This 'Kpofire' (illegal fuel refinery) people are desperadoes too. They carry and sometimes use the abductions to divert attention from the economic sabotage in the oil theft they engage in," an informed resident told this paper.

Graham-Douglas's recurring calls ignored

Four-time Federal Minister, Alabo T O Graham-Douglas, interred September 10, reportedly influenced the late Head of

State, Gen Sani Abacha's administration to connect Emohua to Kalabari Kingdom by road in a contract awarded and inaugurated between 1994 and 1998.

Before that relieving development, hardly any Kalabari community was accessible by road, particularly from Port Harcourt, the Rivers state capital, where most Kalabari residents desirous of homecoming must endure harrowing boat rides from the Abonema Wharf. Others heading for Tonbia would take the ferry from Iwofe.

Painfully for the revered Graham-Douglas, his appeal to successive Federal and Rivers state governments to upgrade the road, following years of deterioration, including cutting and stealing of the hand rays on the two bridges on the stretch, fell on deaf ears, except for occasional palliative patching of insignificance, including efforts of the Federal Road Maintenance Agency (FERMA).

On the day they buried Graham-Douglas Alabo in Abonema, Akuku-Toru local government area, resurgent insecurity, partly escalated by the decrepit condition of the Emohua-Kalabari Road dissuaded some guests and well-wishers from attending the funeral.

ICY hollers

On September 15, Ijaw Youth Council, IYC, in Kalabari Se-Ikpang, Rivers State, threatened to shut down the secretariats of four council areas if by November 28, the chairmen failed to tackle the widespread kidnapping and killings of people on the Emohua-Kalabari Road.

Protesting Ijaw youths stormed the Emohua, Asari-Tolu, Degema, and Akuku Toru local government areas' secretariats, where they submitted disapproval letters to the chairmen on the deplorable and insecure state of the Emohua-Kalabari Road.

Chief Press Secretary, Seleipiri Dokubo, said, "IYC, Kalabari Se-Ikpang, declared, 'We expect a swift response to the above request from Thursday, September 15, 2022, and unequivocally declare Monday, November 28, 2022, to shut down the four (4) Local Government Council Secretariats, if expectations are not met as stated above and the kidnapping and killing of our people persist.'"

Blame game

Expectedly, the latest incidents, as in previous situations, have sparked a blame game among stakeholders. Governor Nyesom Wike, and chairmen of the four local governments connected by the road are among those vilified for perceived neglect of the lousy state of the road and the attendant ordeal unlucky commuters now face.

Wike had executed several internal roads around communities connected by that road, both on the Emohua and Kalabari axes. The reluctance to extend his extensive road delivery in major routes in the state to bear on the Emohua-Kalabari Road remains one point of public displeasure against him.

A South-South leader and famous Kalabari leader, His Highness, Chief Anasara-Igbe, who slammed the governor over the uncertainty on the road, asserted, "A few weeks ago, Governor Nyesom Wike drove through the dilapidated road leading in and out of Kalabari Kingdom and Obuoma the hometown of his Deputy Governor. The Emohua/Kalabari road which is riddled with dangerous potholes and gullies has become commuters' nightmare. This has been further exacerbated by heightened insecurity in the area with kidnapping and other violent crimes occurring daily."

"It is sad that despite knowing how unsecured the area has become because of the deplorable state of the road, the Governor has bluntly refused to rehabilitate the road or undertake any remedial work to ease the difficulties of the Kalabari people who use the road," he said.

In defense of Wike, however, another prominent Kalabari chief said, "We cannot say he has not been good to Kalabari. He has shown appreciable concern for the development of Kalabari land and given the alacrity with which he executes road projects, he could still have been able to do something."

"The challenge now is the federal government had only recently ruled not to allow states to reconstruct or fix federal roads for future refunds. The road in question is a federal road. Such a discouraging fiat could delay the reconstruction or upgrade on this road."

Recalling a similar setback, Kalabari-born journalist with many years of covering Rivers state, Jim Opiki, said, "The other time under Governor Rotimi Amaechi, the Rivers state government made to fix the road, but it was Jonathan, then as President that refused. Issues between them had already started then."

"Amaechi had said it was his (Rivers) people that were dying there and he needed to fix the road so the federal government would refund. Jonathan said no. Then, FERMA has been doing some small, small work on it."

LGAs response

Going forward, Emohua local government chair, Dr. Chidi Chidi Lloyd, said, "My colleagues and I have an arrangement we are working on already. Soon, we will build beats for police officers to occupy the area. We have identified the getaways they (gunmen) use. We will not allow what is happening, to happen again. In a few days, you will see what we will bring."

"We have mapped out the area and we are going to occupy the flashpoints. And with what we have in place under the supervision of the Commissioner of Police, Rivers State Command, CP Friday Eboka, what you hear today will be a thing of the past," he said.