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INEC Offices: Third attack in 12 days claims 4 lives in Imo

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OUTRAGE, yesterday, greeted the attack on the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, office in Imo State, which left no fewer than five persons dead, including two policemen, the third attack in 12 days on the commission offices in the state.

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INEC; Governor Hope Uzodimma of Imo State; Peoples Democratic Party, PDP; Labour Party, LP; and Accord were among those who condemned the attack, which was the 53rd across 29 states that the electoral commission had suffered since 2019.

Yesterday's attack likened to warfare with booming explosive devices and a massive exchange of gunfire between the hoodlums and security agencies, came on a day the INEC started the distribution of Permanent Voters Cards, PVCs, to people, who registered, recently.

The INEC raised the alarm over what it described as systematic and targeted attacks on its facilities nationwide, ahead of the 2023 general elections.

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One policeman, 3 hoodlums were killed, we are out for them – Imo police

A policeman was killed in the attack, while another suffered a severe injury in the gun duel during the gunmen's attack at the Imo State Headquarters of the INEC, Port Harcourt Road, Owerri, in the early hours of yesterday.

This brings to three, the number of INEC offices in the state, attacked by the hoodlums since December 1, 2022. The incident followed the earlier attacks on INEC's Orlu LGA office on December 1, 2022, and the Oru West LGA office on December 4, 2022.

Part of the INEC office was razed by the hoodlums, who used IEDs to completely burn the Election and Party Monitoring, EPM, building.

An INEC staff, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said: “The fire started about 2a.m.,(yesterday morning). The EPM building was completely burnt, while the Accounts and Servicom Departments were also torched.”

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During a visit, Vanguard saw charred remains of some operational vehicles of the commission.

Addressing newsmen at the State Police Command’s Headquarters, Owerri, where the lifeless bodies of the hoodlums were displayed, the Police Public Relations Officer, PPRO, Mr. Michael Abattam, said: “The gunmen killed one policeman and injured another one in the gun duel that lasted for about an hour.

“Five riffles, two vehicles, charms, locally made bombs, phones and money were recovered from the slain gunmen.”

Fielding questions, the PPRO said: “The fully armed attackers came in four vehicles to the INEC office at 3a.m. They threw bombs on the roof of the INEC building.

“They threw bombs at the roof of the INEC building but unfortunately for them, they were strongly resisted by our men, who were on guard at the facility.

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“While they engaged our men on the ground, we quickly mobilized and sent reinforcements. Noticing that we were stronger, they ran away, abandoning one of their vehicles. We gave them a hot chase towards Onitsha Road. Fortunately, we neutralized three of them.”

Saying that the fleeing gangsters escaped with bullet wounds, the PPRO expressed regret that “unfortunately, one of our men paid the supreme price and another one was injured.”

Desperate politicians bent on stopping polls in Imo – Uzodimma

Governor Uzodimma, who visited the scene blamed desperate politicians for the attack, saying that security would be adequately provided for the INEC for the distribution of the PVCs in the state.

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Uzodimma said: “You can see why INEC is the target. I have continuously said that what is happening in Imo State is politically inclined and that they want to make Imo State ungovernable and ensure there will be no election in Imo State.

“However, security agencies are prepared. INEC is prepared and there will be an election in Nigeria. I was told the majority of them who came on this journey are lying critically ill, some are neutralised and others fled with gunshot injuries. The police are ever committed. The other sister agencies are also committed to ensuring security in the state.

“My assurance is that we will have a very beautiful environment for Christmas God willing. We urge our people to come out and collect their PVCs, there will be security agencies from the ward, local government areas to the state level. It will be a fruitful exercise.”

Attacks systematic, targeted at our facilities – INEC

Bemoaning the attack, Dr. Festus Okoye, INEC’s National Commissioner and Chairman of its Information and Voter Education Committee, said: “Our Imo State headquarters is located in the centre of Owerri, between a court and the state secretariat. This is, therefore, yet another systematic attack targeted at the commission’s assets across the country, more so on the day that the collection of PVCs commences nationwide ahead of the 2023 general elections.”

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He added that the Resident Electoral Commissioner REC for Imo State, Prof. Sylvia Agu, had reported that the INEC state headquarters office in Owerri was attacked by gunmen at 3a.m., on Monday.

He said the attack affected the part of the building occupied by the Election and Party Monitoring EPM Department while one official utility vehicle (a Toyota Hilux pickup van) was burnt.

“The response of the security and emergency services (the Fire Service) curtailed further damage to the building and other assets of the commission. No critical election materials were destroyed. There were also no casualties involving staff of the commission,” Okoye said.

PDP kicks, tasks security agencies

The Atiku-Okowa Presidential Campaign Organisation of the, PDP condemned attacks on INEC’s offices and called on Nigerians across party lines to support security services and INEC in their quest to ensure credible elections, next year.

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A spokesperson for the Campaign, Kola Ologbondiyan in a telephone interview with Vanguard, said: “Our campaign condemns this mindless attacks on INEC offices by enemies of Nigeria and our democracy.

“We salute the courage of our security forces, who we understand have made some arrests in relation to the recent attack on the Imo State office of INEC, we urge them to ensure the prosecution of the suspects in order to serve as a deterrent to others. We also appeal to our security agencies to expose the masterminds of these dastardly acts.”

Attempts to derail 2023 elections will fail- LP

Also, the Presidential Campaign Council of the Labour Party described the attacks as part of a larger plot to derail the 2023 general elections.

Chief Spokesperson of the LP PCC, Dr. Yunusa Tanko, told Vanguard in a telephone interview that the attacks on INEC offices have been particularly high in the South-East and described the trend as worrisome.

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Tanko said: “It is worrisome no doubt but we will not be deterred. We see this as an attempt to give the South-East a bad name to give the impression that the people of the area don’t want elections to hold.

“This is a lie. We will continue to support INEC and the security services to ensure that the elections hold all over Nigeria.

“Thankfully, this time around, we heard that some persons were arrested at the crime scene, we will urge authorities concerned to investigate quickly and make the findings

public, so that we know those behind these attacks for they to face the full weight of the law.

“If we may add, there were daily bombings in Borno in 2015 and 2019 elections still held and winners were declared. We wish to state that attempts to create chaos in order to disenfranchise a section of this country will fail.”

It’s a condemnable act— Imumolen, Accord candidate

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Reacting to the attack on INEC offices, Presidential Candidate of Accord Party, Prof. Christopher Imumolen said: “The South-East has been agitating for too long because they feel neglected. The South-East has been marginalized and the President must wade in and ensure the region gets what it needs.

“I believe that the South-East has been marginalized for too long. Nigeria is at war if we must truly say the truth but we need to unite our people but if we fail to do that, we will be seeing more attacks.

“I condemn the burning of INEC officers, especially in the South-East, it is a condemnable act but we must look at the root cause and tackle it.

“For us, we believe the security forces will live up to expectations to ensure that things that are needed to curb incidents like that should be totally eradicated.

“We believe that we must continuously put pressure on the government to ensure there is rule of law and order.”

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Mixed fortunes as INEC begins distribution of PVCs

The commencement of distribution of PVCs to people who registered recently witnessed mixed fortunes across the country.

While INEC offices did not open in most parts of the South-East because of the Monday sit-at-home, the turnout in other parts of the country ranged from low to impressive turnout.

Large turnout as Sanwo-Olu picks PVC in Lagos

Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu of Lagos State, was among those who collected their PVCs in Lagos. The governor picked up his card at the Sura INEC Office, Lagos Island, calling on residents to collect their PVCs to be able to participate actively in 2023 general polls.

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On the exercise, Sanwo-Olu, who recently moved his PVC location, said: “This is just a two-minute exercise, today (Monday) officially kicked off distribution and collection of

PVC. And because I did a re-designation of my address, where I was and where I am I had to move my polling unit and I am here to demonstrate with our citizens that I have complied to pick up my reprinted PVC.

“I, therefore, use this opportunity to enjoin everyone, and ask everyone to seize this opportunity to pick up their PVC.”

Low turnout for PVCs collection in Delta, Ondo, Ekiti

In Asaba, INEC officials in the councils including Oshimili South LGA and Ughelli North LGA were ready with the PVCs but the turnout of people was poor. Those who went said the exercise was seamless as they spent less than 15 minutes to pick up their cards.

In Ondo INEC offices were open across the 18 councils but the turnout was low.

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An officer who spoke with vanguard in confidence, expressed concern over the low turnout, saying: “The turnout today was low, I am sure the turnout will be encouraging from tomorrow.”

In Ekiti INEC officials decried the low collection of PVCs since it commenced distribution in November.

According to them: “People are not really showing up to collect their PVCs. You know our people like a last-minute rush but we will keep doing our job. People do not have any challenges in collecting their PVCs, we already told them to come to our office to collect it.”

Impressive turnout in Plateau, Osun

The first day of the collection of PVC in the Jos/Bukuru metropolis of Plateau State witnessed a large turnout of would-be voters to get their cards.

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Mrs. Regina Abbah, who collected hers at the Jos South LG office expressed joy she was now ready to participate in the 2023 elections.

Vanguard gathered that over 300 PVCs were collected in Jos South LGA alone.

In Osun, the turnout was impressive and there was a smooth collection of PVC by prospective voters. Many spots were created for collection to which the people showed satisfaction.

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