

Abia: Hotel owner demands justice, accuses army of torturing staff to death



....Petitions COAS

. ...Army orders investigation, condoles bereaved families

By Steve Oko

Dr Steve Ihedigbo, the owner and Chief Executive Officer, CEO, of Hotel Royale Damgrate Umuahia, Abia State, where Air Force cadet, allegedly drowned last Tuesday, has accused the Nigeria Army of torturing his staff to death.

Dr Ihedigbo who addressed newsmen Saturday night in Umuahia, alleged that soldiers from the Army base at the Agricultural Development Project (ADP) premises, Umuahia, invited some staff of the hotel to their base for interrogation following the alleged drowning of the Air Force cadet, and later started beating them.

He alleged that his Food and Beverage Manager, Mr James Etubi who was engaged by the hotel on April 5, 2024, died while he was being tortured by the Army.

Recall that Air Force cadet, Chidiebere Onyemereche, who was on a pass, visited Umuahia with his friend, and allegedly drowned inside the swimming pool of the hotel last Tuesday.

Narrating how it happened, Dr Ihedigbo said he was alerted around 6:45pm by his Manager on Tuesday April 9, that somebody was missing around the pool side of the hotel.

” When I got the call I quickly drove down to the hotel and went direct to the pool side. When I got there I was told that the boy did not jump inside the swimming pool.

” They were going outside to check whether he went outside or inside the toilet. Up till around 8 pm he was not found but I was told they started looking for him since 5:00pm.

” About nine police men where already there when I got to the pool side. Everybody was searching for the boy. Fire service men were called and they brought their vehicle and lather.

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” The father of the deceased also came and told me that his son should be released, and I told him that I don’t understand what was going on. He told me that his son’s colleague said his son did not swim.

” So, there was confusion. But we called three divers who went into the pool to search for him, and they found him and brought him out. Everybody was surprised that he did not look like somebody who got drowned because his tummy was very flat. No water was coming out from the mouth or nose.

Everybody including security agencies and his father was very surprised.

” Then the police took him to the mortuary. His father told us there was nothing he could do, adding that he has been seeing this type of thing.”

Continuing, Ihedigbo said that the next day, the police came to arrest his Manager and three other staff for questioning, and later released them on bail.

He added that on Thursday, some Army personnel stormed the hotel and said

they would want to interrogate some of the staff.

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According to him, his Manager who had been sick later went to the Army base at ADP where she was interrogated till late evening but released with an instruction to bring the other three staff unfailingly by 8:00am the next day for questioning. " So, the next day, they went back to ADP and interrogations continued. I was told that after the interrogation they were ordered to be beaten and they started beating them. The most unfortunate thing was that the other cadet who came with the deceased and should be the prime suspect, was among those beating my staff.

" I was told they concentrated on my Food and Beverage Manager, Mr James Etubi. They beat him to a pulp. Unfortunately, he was the man that was supposed to give us evidence because he was in charge of the pool side.

"He was there when everything happened but they just killed him for reasons I don't know. They were hitting him at the neck and head. When he died, they put him in a tricycle with others and took them to the hospital where he was just confirmed dead. "

Dr Ihedigbo lamented that his other workers tortured along side the victim, were yet to recover from the beating by the Army.

" One of my staff, a lady has been taken to the hospital and the other man is very sick because of the beating."

The hotel owner alleged that the other cadet that came to the hotel with the deceased officer was related to the wife of a senior police officer at the Central Police Station, CPS, Umuahia, insisting that nobody should be shielded.

" Yesterday, I went to ADP, and I saw him but he is the person who should be the principal suspect. I was told that the deceased cadet officer even paid for both of them.

" He was the one who deceived everybody, saying that his friend was outside while he was being searched for. He said his friend did not enter the pool. So, for three hours, he deceived everybody. We were looking for him outside without knowing he was inside the pool."

Responding to an inquiry on whether the cadet officer and his friend came to lodge in the hotel, Dr Ihedigbo said "they came to swim and drink, not to lodge". Asked if the Close Circuit Television , CCTV, camera of the hotel captured happenings at the pool side, he said some of the CCTV cameras were affected by a recent heavy rain and thunderstorm, and had not been repaired before the incident.

Dr Ihedigbo, who said he had already petitioned the Chief of Army Staff, demanded thorough and dispassionate investigation to unravel what exactly happened.

He also demanded justice both for the deceased cadet officer and his staff who died while he was allegedly being tortured by soldiers.

" I want justice served, and let the perpetrators of this crime be brought to book. I want this to be properly addressed by the Army headquarters."

Dr Ihedigbo who said it was the first time such incident was being witnessed in the hotel since 24 years it was established, refuted media reports that the pool was undergoing some maintenance.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian Army, has ordered investigations into the matter.

A statement by the Director, Army Public Relations, Gen. Onyema Nwachukwu, said the Chief of Army Staff, had ordered comprehensive investigation into the matter.

The Army registered its concern over the incident and condoled with the families

The Army registered its concern over the incident and condoled with the families of the deceased.

The statement read: "The Nigerian Army (NA) is deeply concerned by the alleged unprofessional conduct of some of its personnel in the tragic death of a hotel manager in Umuahia, Abia State, as reported in some online media.

" In response to this unfortunate incident, the Chief of Army Staff has promptly ordered a comprehensive investigation to ascertain the facts and bring to book, anyone found culpable.

"The NA extends its heartfelt condolences to the families of the deceased Manager Mr Achimugu James Etubi and the Nigerian Air Force Officer Cadet Emmanuel Chidiebere Onyemereche and assure the public that every effort will be made to ensure that justice is served.

"The Army is committed to upholding the highest standards of professionalism and discipline, and therefore any personnel found culpable of wrongdoing will face appropriate legal sanctions.

"Furthermore, the NA reaffirms its unwavering dedication to safeguarding the security of all citizens. We remain steadfast in our mission to promote lasting peace and security throughout Nigeria.

"The Nigerian Army is resolute in its pursuit of truth and justice, and we will keep the public informed at the conclusion of the investigation."