

Money for Bail, Illegal Detention: Activists lay siege to Police hqtrs in Delta



•Ugolor (middle), with other protesters at Delta State Police Command Hq in Asaba.

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The executive director of the African Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (ANEEJ), Rev. David Ugolor, led other human rights activists from Delta and Edo states to peaceably protest the collection of money for bail and the unlawful detention of citizens by the Police.

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The demonstration by an advocacy group, the Bail is Free Campaign, was triggered by the illegal detention of two innocent citizens, Mr. Godfrey Jonah and Mr. Henry Umukoro, popularly known as Engr. Hero, by the Police after extorting N500,000 from them for an offence they did not commit.

Outraged by the impunity, extortion, and abuse of citizens' rights by the police, Ugolor, joined by allies from Delta State, Asaba-based civic groups, the media (both print and electronic), and other justice advocates, marched from Okpanam Road to the Delta State Police Command Headquarters in Asaba last Monday.

Chanting songs of solidarity and undeterred by the heavy police presence at the gate, the demonstrators marched in full confidence, exemplifying the spirit of the "Bail is Free Campaign," symbolically launched during the protest.

Meeting with senior Police officers

Upon arrival, the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), SP Bright Edafe, listened to Rev. Ugolor as he presented the grievances, particularly the unlawful detention of Mr. Henry Umukoro and Mr. Godfrey Jonah, who had been held for nearly three weeks at both the Oghara Division and the State Command in Asaba.

SP Edafe welcomed the group and requested that five delegates be selected to meet with senior police officials for a formal briefing and resolution process.

Ugolor gave a comprehensive account of the events, from the initial arrests in Oghara to the escalating injustices at the state level when his team met with the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of Operations, in the absence of the Commissioner of Police

He recounted earlier attempts to engage with the police hierarchy, which had been ignored, and detailed how officers at both levels had extorted N500,000 under the guise of bail and an additional N230,000 for purported logistics to revisit the crime scene, amounting to a total of N730,000.

The DCP, Operations, acknowledged the grievances and expressed deep regret over the conduct of his officers.

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He commended the peaceful nature of the protest and assured the delegates that the Commissioner of Police and the Command regretted the misconduct of their personnel.

He promptly ordered the unconditional release of Umukoro and Jonah, the two bricklayers, to Rev. Ugolor.

DPO Oghara is not privy to the scandal

NDV learned that the Divisional Police Officer, DPO, in Oghara was not privy to the bribe of N500,000 collected by his subordinates, as he authorised the release of Umukoro without requesting or receiving any financial inducement.

He decided, after the deceased's family indicated its unwillingness to pursue the matter further, to release Umukoro and Jonah.

One of his officers collected the N500,000 from Umukoro's family, according to him, allegedly to appreciate the Police.

How it started

The convener of the Bail is Free Campaign told NDV: "What began as a case involving a mob attack on a suspected thief spiraled into a textbook case of abuse of power, culminating in a public protest at the State Police Headquarters in Asaba and the dramatic return of a N500,000 bribe.

"It all began on April 19, when Mr. Godfrey Jonah, a professional bricklayer, and a colleague were working at a construction site in Oghara, Delta State.

"While on duty, officers from the Oghara Police Division stormed the area and arrested them in connection with a mob lynching that had occurred nearby.

"The incident resulted in the death of a suspected thief who had reportedly fled into a residential area close to the project site.

"Although Mr. Jonah had no involvement in the lynching, his sudden arrest shocked the local community.

"According to Jonah, they had just mixed cement with water at the time of the incident, making it practically impossible for them to abandon their work to participate in any mob action. This, they maintained, was clear evidence of their innocence.

The suspected thief died in Police custody

"Following the mob incident, the suspected thief, who was apprehended alive, later died in Police custody, where the family came to collect his body to bury.

"Given the young man's known criminal reputation, his family, perhaps resigned to his pattern of notorious behavior, did not pursue the matter further; instead, they affirmed that he was indeed a thief.

How Police seized Umukoro

"Prompted by a sense of civic duty, Mr. Henry Umukoro, also a professional builder, visited the Oghara Police Station on April 21 to seek bail for his colleague on the project site, Jonah.

"Shockingly, he too was detained on arrival, despite the absence of any credible evidence linking him to the alleged incident.

"Despite the absence of due process, both men languished in detention for two days before their conditional release on April 22.

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however, a hefty price was paid for their release. a N500,000 bail payment that was allegedly extorted by a Police officer and transferred by a youth leader from Oghara.

Re-arrest, brutality, and the road to Asaba

“Following their initial release, the men were instructed to report back to the Oghara Police Division on April 23 as part of the conditions of their bail. Innocent and confident, they returned to the station, heads held high.

“Upon arrival, the Divisional Crime Officer (DCO2) informed them that the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) wished to see them. However, the DPO was unavailable, and the officers, noticing their dirty work clothes, told them to return to their jobs for the day.

“Despite the inconvenience, the men offered Ishegware (a financial token of appreciation) to the officers, reflecting their good faith.

“But the situation soon took a darker turn. On April 29, the DCO2 called again, stating that the DPO was now available and requesting their presence the following day.

“On April 30, Umukoro and Jonah returned to the station, only to be detained once more without explanation. When Jonah attempted to inquire why they were being held again, he was allegedly beaten with a baton (locally referred to as gojure) by a Police officer, striking him on the head and body.”

The officer vaguely stated that the case had been transferred to Asaba, and the men would be moved to the Delta State Police Command, Asaba, in May.

The transfer was made under the pretext that the State Commissioner of Police needed to meet with them.

Matters degenerated

At the Delta State Police Command in Asaba, matters worsened. An officer reportedly demanded N230,000 from me (Rev. David Ugolor), who had stepped in to assist the detainees.

Ugolor stated: “The amount was paid into an account belonging to a nominee of the officer. Yet, despite this payment, no action was taken. Jonah and Umukoro remained unlawfully detained, victims of a deeply flawed and extortion-driven system.”

The Bail Is Free campaign was launched in Asaba

Following their release, the “Bail is Free Campaign” was officially launched at the Delta State Police Command premises.

The PPRO joined the five delegates and the newly released detainees for a group photograph with the campaign banner, symbolizing a collective stand against police extortion.

The event concluded with a world press conference at the Delta State Police Command’s gate, where several comrades, including Rev. Ugolor, addressed the media.