

Okomu survivors: we saw death

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Mrs. Comfort Bassey is a widow from Cross River State. Her husband died two years ago leaving her to cater for their two children. To eke out a living, she took to working as a contract staff at the Okomu Oil Palm Plc at Udo in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State. She works as an harvester.

For providence, Mrs Bassey's children would have been orphaned as she narrowly escaped being killed on the bloody Tuesday inside the oil palm plantation when workers of Okomu were attacked by some youths allegedly of Ijaw extraction in the locality.

Two workers simply identified as Samuel and George were shot dead while Comfort and six other workers were asked to lie down and shot at. They are currently receiving treatment at a private hospital in Benin City, the Edo state capital.

The Okomu workers were victims of a battle between the palm oil company and some Ijaw youths who have asked the company to leave the premises.

The dispute between workers of Okomu and the Ijaw attackers left two dead and seven others hospitalised. The workers are spoiling for a revenge attack to ensure their continual survival in the farm.

Okomu Oil Palm Plc owns vast oil palm and rubber plantations at Udo and it is the largest employer of labour in the locality. Its facilities are guarded by over 120 armed personnel, including men of the Police and the Army. Despite the heavy security presence and supposed cordial relationship between the company and its host communities, the Ijaw youths in the locality have continued to unleash mayhem on the company and its workers.

Last year, about 300 hectares of oil palm and rubber plantation belonging to Okomu Oil were set ablaze. The company management also received leaflets asking it to leave the land or face dire consequences.

It was gathered that some of the attackers were former employees of the company who believed that they were unjustly sacked while another version said the attackers wanted more social responsibility from the company.

A Niger national who escaped the attacked said the attackers numbered over 30 and were heavily armed with dangerous weapons and ammunition.

At the hospital where Comfort and others were receiving treatment, it was a pitiable sight of pain, anguish and confusion. She said she would have stayed away from work that day if the attackers had earlier warned them.

She said: "I have been working since last year. I am a harvester. What happened was that our head man was addressing us on the work we did on Monday. We concentrated on what we were doing and didn't know when we were surrounded. Others saw us being circled and ran away. We could not run away. They told us to wait and asked us to call others or they would kill us. We lied down and I lost hope in life. I was shot at close range. If they had warned us not to enter the farm again I would not have gone to work that day."

Another employee, Joseph Darton, was shot on the anus and on both legs.

He said: "This is a gunshot wound. I was shot by Ijaw. I was going to work. They said they came to warn us not to come to work again. They were about 15 and heavily arms. We were 36 workers at the farm at that time."

"They gather around us but some workers escaped. They said those that ran wanted to go and call security men. They decided to shoot all of us remaining. They shot at my leg after asking us to lie down They fired at us and said: 'As your people run, we will kill the rest'."

A soft spoken 30-year old victim, Happiness Asuquo, said she saw hell and had already prayed to God to accept her soul.

An employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said several workers have been attacked in the past but the management usually kept mum about the incidents. He said the killing of the two workers that Tuesday occurred at a place not far from where security operatives are based.

He said: "This matter does not concern us. We are just workers but the Ijaw boys always attack us and leave the management staff alone.

"The boys need something from the management but this Managing Director is too stubborn. The security men on ground have not exchange gunshot with the attackers since trouble started last year."

"We decided to cry out so that management can do something about these killings."

Okomu's Human Resources Controller, Ikponmwosa Osunbor said the company has reported several threats to security agencies but nothing was done to curtail the attack.

He said, "People who went to do their legitimate job were rounded up and brutally beaten. It happened at about 7:30 am. There have been warnings by this group. They have been burning our plantations and we have been making reports to security agency on the need to address the situation. If we know what they want we would have been able to solve the problem. We have letters thrown into the plantation asking us to leave and threat to attack us.

“In November last year, we had a meeting with neighbouring communities and the Ijaw did not send representatives. We have cordial relationship with our host communities. We want an immediate end to the crisis. We are at the mercy of these people. We cannot carry gun or move into the community to fight back. There are security agents around but we don’t control them. They don’t report to us. We have 120 army personnel in our plantation but the boys are still attacking our workers in the bush.”

“Government should provide more security for us. Our fear is that it will not turn into a tribal war.”

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Police spokesman DSP Joseph Edogiawerie confirmed the report and said the attack was led by an Ijaw youth, Lawrence Iyambo.

He said: “The report from Iguobazuwa revealed that a group of armed men led by one Lawrence Iyambo of Okomu Ijaw community invaded Okomu plantation and killed two of the company field workers and seven others are hospitalised.

“They have made series of report about threat to attack by these groups. Soldiers are deployed there along with policemen in view of bringing the situation under control and apprehend the culprits. No arrest has been mad for now but results will be achieved.”

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