

BENUE: TROUBLING SIGNS AND NEED FOR IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

In March 2017, the local government areas of Buruku and Ukum in Benue state were attacked by hundreds of well-armed and well-coordinated gunmen arriving in vehicles and motorcycles. Each attack took the people of the area and security agents unawares and scores of lives, mostly those of women and children were needlessly lost. Speculations about the attacks range from suggestions that the killings were the aftermath of aggrieved herdsmen to intra-ethnic bickering to external attacks from a neighboring state.

The above situation gives Lawyers Alert cause for extreme apprehension as we see parallels with the Borno situation from these spates of attacks on states in Nigeria's North Central including Nasarawa, Plateau, and Benue State. Lawyers Alert makes bold to sound a note of alarm to the Federal Government that this is a situation that must be tackled with



urgency to avoid the escalation that brought about the mayhem that has bedeviled the North East wrought by Boko Haram. The manner and style of shooting at defenseless people in markets are Boko Haram modus and certainly, Nigeria does not need nor can we handle the second version of this horror or nightmare in our country. We call on the Buhari Administration to act fast to stem this in its infancy, but yet same bloody results. Borno must never be replicated anywhere in Nigeria. Enough is enough. The time to act is NOW.

Lawyers Alert, notes particularly the deaths of 2 individuals, also in March, whose relations are here with us. In one instance, a student Master Paul Ipaven, a JSS 3 Student of Holy Family Catholic Secondary School Jato Aka, Turan, Kwande local government area, aged 17 lost his life from a stray bullet, said to have been fired by the Nigerian Army to disperse community members who had detained a vehicle they believed to be carrying arms. This happened in the presence of the Council Sole Administrator, and the DPO of Kwande Division, who both moved the corpse to the NKST Hospital mortuary Jato Aka. The Nigerian Army states the shots were the result of a shootout between them and local vigilantes and the death was likely caused by a bullet fired by the vigilantes. The question begging answers though, is, why was it the Nigerian Army, and not the Police, that was called in to rescue a detained vehicle.

In the second instance, a young prisoner at the Jato Aka Prison Farm, Mr. Agidi Tersoo Tor, aged about 25 years old, with just a few months left on his sentence, had gone to the stream to fetch water, escorted by prison wardens when he was also felled by a bullet. The Nigerian Prisons/Federal Government reacted by moving all prisoners out of Jato Aka Prison Farm to Gboko prisons. This action could be interpreted as the Government's inability to protect prisoners or the lack of a political will to do so. As we speak, the family of the deceased inmate is yet to be formally notified of his demise.

Whatever the interpretation, it's pertinent to note that a citizen lost his life and as we speak, the deceased's family is yet to be served with so much as a condolence letter by the Federal Government or the Nigerian Prisons Services.

The dismay here is the fact that Security agencies, which ought to have put pre-emptive strategies in place were caught napping as the marauders carry out these acts without challenge. It is pertinent to point out that the chief role of government at all levels is the protection of lives and property of Citizens as specified in the 1999 Constitution, chapter 2 section 2b: "the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government."

Never has there been a time in the history of Nigeria when there has been a greater need to keep the Police properly trained and equipped as now. Intelligence gathering is a necessity and can easily be achieved with the current advancements in technology. Security has gradually evolved from a place of reactive to pro proactive. The onus lies on the





Federal Government to urgently upgrade the Nigerian Police to be able to cope with the current challenges of civil unrest.

The state government also has a major role to play and we commend Governor Samuel Ortom for his untiring efforts to return peace to the state. Shortly after assuming office, the arms buy-back project reduced the number of small arms scattered across the state as many were turned in. That said, much remains to be done as we are sure Governor Ortom himself is fully aware. It is in line with efforts at finding a lasting solution
Lawyers Alert states the following:

The Federal Government:

- The immediate upgrade of security in the hinterlands of Benue where scores of citizens even as speak now suffer unnecessary deaths almost every day. An on-the-ground assessment of the situation by the Federal government is critical so as have firsthand knowledge of what this is. This a Boko Haram reincarnate in terms of the killing template.
- The Federal Government should set up a Commission of inquiry to investigate the immediate and remote causes of the Ukum and Buruku slaughters to identify the masterminds, bring the culprits to book, and compensating the victims.
- The passage of cattle and herdsmen through the Benue valley should be halted in the interim pending possible solutions. Undoubtedly there is the freedom of movement and the need for commerce, yet, in situations where lives are needlessly lost in hundreds, a temporary halt, while solutions are explored ranging from dialogue, etc., is in order.
- Federal Government security agencies should improve their intelligence gathering ability. These attacks are too coordinated and often, and we daresay say, some bit of proactive intelligence can potentially neutralize a few.

Benue State Government

- The Benue State Government should synergize its Security position with the Security Agencies in the State especially the State Police Command.
- The Benue State Government should intensify and strengthen peace-building committees across troubled spots to include herdsmen, farmers, and other critical stakeholders.
- The State House of Assembly should carefully go through the Grazing Bill currently before it, which the state government has requested be sped up. In their bid to reach a quick conclusion, the people of Benue should not be saddled with a law that could work against the interests of the people as feelers seem to indicate at the moment.

Actions

- Lawyers Alert condemns the Jato Aka/Zaki Biam killings completely and views them as acts of negligence/failure on the part of Government in the protection of lives and property of citizens.
- Lawyers Alert posits that the Nigerian Army and the Nigeria Prison Service be held accountable for the deaths of Master Ipaven Paul Ayem and Mr. Agidi Tersoo Tor respectively as will we approach the courts in seeking the determination of culpability on the part of the Nigeria Army and the Nigeria Prisons Service in this regard. This is the least we can do for the deceased.

Conclusion:

In Conclusion, Lawyers Alert considers all extrajudicial killings a gross violation of fundamental Human Rights. All lives are sacrosanct and where any life is taken for any reason beyond judicial spheres, the responsibility lies on the Government at all levels to remedy the situation and bring to justice the perpetrators of such acts.

ABOUT

LAWYERS

ALERT

Lawyers Alert is a National Human Rights NGO that caters for the vulnerable and seeks a democratic Nigeria where the weakest are treated with respect and dignity of the human person. Lawyers Alert is headquartered in Makurdi Benue state, with a field office in Abuja, and members across the country.

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