

Army massacres civilians and police shoot to kill in Nigeria

Chris Talbot
8 December 1999

After just six months of civilian rule in Nigeria President Olusegun Obasanjo has unleashed the army in the oil-producing Delta region, resulting in a massacre of the population in a small town. At the same time he instituted a shoot-to-kill policy and a police roundup of members of a militant tribalist organisation in Lagos. Both measures were clearly designed to intimidate the growing opposition to the government which is carrying out IMF-dictated policies, exacerbating the already appalling levels of poverty and unemployment.

Hundreds of troops were sent into the town of Odi in the Bayelsa state region of the Niger Delta area over the weekend of November 20-21 in response to the killing of 12 policemen the previous month, allegedly by youth protesters. The youth were from the Ijaw ethnic group—the main tribal group in Odi and one of several minority tribes in the Delta. There were reports that artillery was used, resulting in a number of deaths, and the area remained sealed off for over a week.

A group of Nigerian journalists were then allowed to visit the town together with an investigative mission from the National Assembly on Monday, November 29. Their reports present a horrifying picture. Every building in the town, which is 3 kilometres from one end to the other, was in ruins. The town contained about 25,000 inhabitants, most of whom had fled into the surrounding countryside. Roofs were burnt and walls breached with thousands of spent shells on the ground. Only four buildings, including a church, a bank and a school, were left standing.

Soldiers manning roadblocks were carrying a range of weapons, including FN rifles, AK-47s, general purpose machineguns and bazookas. Numbers of corpses were left rotting by the roadside or dumped into surrounding waterways. When the Senate President leading the

delegation, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo, asked the commanding officer why they had carried out such total destruction he claimed that the Ijaw youth had automatic weapons and it was necessary to avoid more army casualties. The reporter for the *Nigerian Tempo* said that the pattern of destruction did not fit this explanation. "All the destroyed houses follow the same format—a burnt roof and breached walls, which makes it look like each house was taken out on its own." Also there were no remains of household furniture, which meant that "either property has been looted or they were destroyed and dumped into the River Nun".

Reports state that only a few older women remained in the town. Irorogha told how her husband had been killed in front of her and Dora Nana described how the soldiers shot and killed her four children. When asked where their men were, the women said that many had been killed and dumped into the river.

A human rights lawyer and member of the Ijaw National Congress, Bello Orubebe, interviewed by the Nigerian *P.M. News*, said that on the eve of Okadigbo's visit 375 corpses had been recovered from Odi, but that the total dead could not be ascertained because the soldiers would not allow access for the retrieval of corpses for burial.

As well as deploying the army in Odi the Nigerian regime has also reacted with extreme force in response to the ethnic unrest that broke out in Lagos on November 25. Obasanjo was quoted in a television interview saying, "The police have been instructed that any criminal should be shot on sight. Anyone who calls himself OPC [the Oodua Peoples Congress] should be arrested and if he doesn't agree he will be shot on sight—we cannot allow this country to be overtaken by hoodlums and criminals. When people decide to behave like animals then they must be treated like animals."

A massive police and security operation in Lagos state has led to the arrest of about 200 members of the OPC, a group which calls for greater self-determination for the Yoruba, one of the three main tribal groupings in Nigeria. How many OPC members have been killed by police acting under Obasanjo's orders is not clear. The ethnic conflict was between Yoruba and Hausa youth, and appears to have started in a dispute between Hausa and Yoruba traders at Mile 12 market in the Ketu district. Fighting lasted over 24 hours and more than 100 people were killed. Market stalls, shops and residential buildings were burnt down as youths attacked civilians indiscriminately with machetes. According to the *Tempo* newspaper, armed mobile policemen took part in the killings. They cite one witness who saw the police murder five innocent civilians in their compound, including her brother.

It seems that, despite Obasanjo's denunciation, the OPC had little involvement in the conflict. Both the local governor of the area and even the police commissioner have said that the OPC were not responsible. Obasanjo accused the governor of "feather-bedding" the OPC.

Behind the massacre in the Delta region is the government's resolve to suppress the militant organisations of the various tribal groupings. Poverty and unemployment, together with the oil pollution in this region, has led to gangs of youths attacking oil installations and kidnapping oil workers.

In Lagos too, political commentators point to the high levels of poverty and unemployment levels of 50 percent and more as the cause of ethnic conflict. The mass of the population had expected the civilian government would tackle the appalling social decline, but Obasanjo's actions show that this is far from the case. As the *Financial Times* commented, "The actions of his administration have been startlingly similar to those of past regimes which wielded a lot of stick and little carrot when attempting to stem the activities of minority rights groups."

Obasanjo's administration has received Western backing to boost gas and oil production, expand private investment, pay off the huge debts built up by the military regime, and cut out the high levels of corruption amongst the Nigerian elite. He has accepted IMF demands for its representatives to set up a mission at the Nigerian Central Bank and the Finance Ministry,

monitoring every aspect of the economy. As in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, IMF privatisation policies can only increase the levels of unemployment and poverty.

Insofar as the method of political rule has changed since the previous military dictatorship, the elections—which were largely fraudulent—have given a greater role to regional elites and handpicked politicians. Obasanjo has attempted to cultivate the competition between rival regional and tribalist groupings by offering limited handouts—for example \$50 million to renovate the infrastructure in the Delta region. In the budget the government promised that each of the 36 states which make up the Nigerian federation could keep 13 percent of revenues generated locally, again a limited concession to the oil-rich Delta region. Such politics can only encourage tribalist conflicts.

Given the absence of socialist politics to unite the working people and poor masses throughout Nigeria against the transnationals and international banks, tribalist groupings like the OPC—which claims to have 3.2 million members—and the Ijaw, Ogoni and other movements of the Delta, have come to the fore. In the northern areas Hausa politicians have attempted to impose Islamic fundamentalism.

Tribalist politics are nothing new in Nigeria—they were fomented by the British colonialists in the first half of the century and led to the civil war of 1966-70. They were only suppressed during the last 30 years by military rule. To maintain its IMF policies, Obasanjo's government will increasingly have to resort to the kind of brutal methods it has used in Odi and the Lagos suburbs.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact