

Nigerian soldiers carry out massacres

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This week hundreds of villagers in Nigeria have been massacred by the army. In four ethnic-Tiv villages in Benue, soldiers rounded up and killed over 200 unarmed civilians. Zaki Biam, a town of about 20,000 people, was completely destroyed.

According to eyewitnesses, the military team came in eight armoured cars. They came to Anyiin first where they were said to have summoned all the villagers to Gbeji public square, claiming that they had an urgent message for them.

As soon as the villagers were gathered, the troops asked all the women and children to leave and then opened fire on the men, killing 100. At another village, the village head, a blind old man who is uncle to the former army chief, General Victor Malu, was killed alongside his wife. Their bodies were burnt inside the house.

A BBC correspondent in Nigeria, Dan Isaacs, reported from Zaki Biam that “they have destroyed every single building. Everything is burned out—walls are still standing but everything has been gutted. They came in and shelled buildings. They shot buildings with rocket propelled grenades—there are bullet holes all around.”

A local television crew visited Zaki Biam shortly after the massacre, and filmed graphic pictures of around 100 charred bodies lying in the streets. There is compelling evidence that people in other villages were rounded up, shot and their bodies subsequently set alight.

Tens of thousands of Tiv villagers have fled into the bush to escape the army crackdown. A Benue official in charge of resettling displaced people told Reuters, “We can’t account for the displaced... The people fleeing have no access to food, water or medicine.” He said that up to 60,000 displaced people streaming in from Taraba had been registered even before this week’s killings.

The killings were reprisals for the deaths of 19 soldiers who had been abducted and killed in the same district two weeks ago. They had been sent to quell violence between two local tribes, the Tivs and Jukuns, and the army blames Tiv militias for their deaths.

A press release by Amnesty International said, “It appears that the attack by the troops was an act of revenge which went on for three days. There was no imminent danger to the life of soldiers who took part in this military operation. It can only be described as a killing spree.”

Military officials acknowledged Thursday that troops were deployed with instructions to disarm ethnic militias and arrest those responsible for the death of the 19 soldiers, but claimed that the troops were under strict instructions not to shoot unless fired upon. A spokesman for the Nigerian army, Colonel Felix Chukwuma, denied that troops had killed any villagers, in spite of the evidence and eyewitness reports.

President Olusegun Obasanjo ordered the troops into the area, directing security agents to track down those behind the killing of 19 military personnel. He said the motive of the killers was sinister and aimed at destabilising the country. The massacres of villagers began on the same day.

Obasanjo, fearful of international criticism, has ordered the army to halt all military activity in the area. But Army Chief of Staff General Alexander Ogomudia said the crackdown would continue until Tiv militiamen blamed for the killing of the 19 soldiers were apprehended. He denied the army was on a revenge mission or taking sides in the conflict between the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups.

The events are reminiscent of a massacre that took place in the town of Odi in the Bayelsa state region of the Niger Delta two years ago. Then the army moved in, destroying the town and massacring hundreds of people, in response to the killing of 12 policemen the

previous month.

Militants of the Tivs and Jukuns have been fighting sporadically since the early 1990s and before in Benue and neighbouring Taraba states. The dispute is partly due to the fact that the state borders (which have only existed in their present form since 1996) cut across the traditional movement of those involved in farming.

The method of agricultural production—slash and burn—means that farmers must constantly move to cultivate new areas. In the recent period pressure on the land has increased because of a shifting of Tiv people from the north, partly because of the desertification of the land there and to escape from strict Muslim Sharia law. Sharia had existed for a long time in northern Nigeria, but was not strictly implemented until last year. This has made non-Muslim ethnic minorities fearful of religious domination.

During its sixty years of colonial rule, Britain controlled the population by fomenting regional and ethnic divisions. When the country gained independence in 1960, the tensions didn't ease. Throughout the whole period of Nigeria's independence, ethnic conflicts and tensions have threatened to tear the country apart. They have invariably been put down by brutal military action.

Obsanjano became president in 1999 in rigged elections. He replaced the military dictatorship that had ruled Nigeria since the 1960s. This was largely at the behest of the IMF and World Bank, which called for "transparent government", to open up the country to direct investment by the transnational corporations.

Since then, despite the country's huge oil wealth, the conditions faced by the people of Nigeria have deteriorated. There has been a rapid growth of desperate poverty and unemployment in the cities and severe impoverishment in the rural areas.

In an attempt to prop up his rule, Obsanjano has paid out some of the oil revenue to local elites. He has divided the regions into smaller and smaller units, thus giving financial benefits to leaders of the smaller ethnic groups like the Tiv and the Jukuns in the Benue area. There is little doubt that inter-ethnic conflicts have been stoked up by these elites in an attempt to get their hands on more government funds.

The Tiv Progressive Movement sent a letter to President Olusegun Obasanjo, signed by the movement's president, General Wanteregh Paul

Unongo, saying of the Tiv-Jukun conflict, "...this war will be vicious, bloody and will be fought with such a ferocity that it may produce consequences worse than, or at least similar to, the horrible spectacles seen in disasters of Bosnia, the Democratic republic of Congo and even Rwanda."

From the other side of the divide, the Aku Uka of Wukari, the traditional ruler of the Jukun, Dr. Shekarau Angyu Masa-Ibi Kuvyo II, is on record as saying that the root of the crisis in an alleged expansionist tendency on the part of the Tiv, saying, "They (the Tiv) came here to farm; we allowed them, gave them chieftaincy titles... Now that their population has increased, they believe they are many enough to colonise us."

The massacres sparked violent outbreaks in the Benue state capital, Makurdi, where angry Tiv students from two universities rampaged through the streets Wednesday, armed with sticks, knives and iron bars. Red Cross workers said they counted 10 bodies the next day on the streets of Makurdi, where calm was restored after soldiers enforced a curfew.

The war being waged in Afganistan by the United States and Britain has emboldened Nigeria's ruling elite to take tough measures to quell opposition. The members of the House of Representatives have called on the federal government to take decisive military action, citing the operation of government troops in 1999 in razing the Delta town of Odi to the ground, which left dozens of civilians dead, as the example the authorities should follow.



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