

Pogrom in Plateau: Why?

By Ray Ekpu

It was an unmitigated disaster. As Christians were preparing to mark the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, tragedy struck in three local government areas of Plateau State. Over 20 villages in Bokkos, Mangu and Barkin Ladi Local Government Areas of the state were attacked. Almost 200 persons, men, women and children, massacred and 1300 houses set aflame while at least 88 persons were rushed to hospitals with varying degrees of injuries. About 10, 000 of the survivors have been displaced. They are now refugees in their own country, uncertain where their next meal will come from or whether the attackers will come to where they are to complete their devious assignment.

Those who survived the pogrom can thank Mother Luck, but most of them lost their relations. Here are the wailings of some of the survivors. One of them said: "My entire 21 relatives were wiped out." Another said that as they attacked "We pretended to be dead but as my son tried to crawl away, the Fulani attackers noticed that he was not dead, they killed him." One woman said: "While escaping with matchet cuts I didn't know that my baby had fallen from my back." Another survivor said that he saw a wailing child strapped to the back of her dead mother. Another moaned in agony "The invaders killed my father and 10 of our family members." An observer noticed that "even crawling babies were not spared by the attackers."

These remarks by the survivors summarise, in a very tragically pathetic fashion, the pogrom that took place on Christmas eve in a territory which, years ago, was the centre of attraction for foreign and local tourists because of its exquisite beauty and adorable climate and ambience. The Plateau is now a killing field, a place of horror, a place to run away from, not a place to go to. It has been like that for many years now and lovers of civilization have been wondering when the state will regain its adorable ambience and its peaceful serenity.

On May 18, 2004, President Olusegun Obasanjo had declared a state of emergency in Plateau State following a spate of mutual killings between Christians and muslims. Many lives, hundreds of lives, were lost in what Obasanjo described as "near mutual genocide." President Obasanjo sacked the Governor, Mr Joshua Dariye, whom he described as incompetent in managing the cycle of

killings between Muslims and Christians in the State. The President appointed a retired soldier, Chris Ali, to run the affairs of the state for six months as an Interim Administrator.

On the recent attacks, in which close to 200 persons were massacred, the Defence Headquarters has offered an explanation. It says that it received over 30 distress calls from the villagers when the attacks were going on but they could not respond soon enough because of the poor terrain that leads to the communities. This is a laughable, a very, very laughable explanation. How did the attackers get to the communities? Whatever means the attackers used to get there, our gallant soldiers should have used such means too. Second, soldiers fight wars in bushes and rough terrains. That is why they use rugged vehicles, so what happened to their rugged vehicles that can bulldoze their way through the most treacherous terrains in the world.



Third, this is a failure of intelligence because the area is a known target for attackers. In June 2023, over 100 villagers were killed by terrorists/attackers in Mangu Local Government Area, one of the three LGAs that was the target of the Christmas eve attack. Fourth, the Country Director of Amnesty International, Mr Isa Sanusi, says that from information available to them, the terrorists operated for something like 48 hours, moving from one village to another. I have not independently verified or confirmed this information but if they operated in about 20 villages, they must have spent a long time or must have operated in such large numbers as should have attracted the widespread attention of security operatives.

It is also possible that these villages are far removed from where our security personnel operated from but since there was an attack there six months ago, the place ought

to be under the radar of our security operatives. The failure to tackle the terrorists by our security agencies brings to the fore, once more, the issue of State Police. These attacks took place in villages, not in towns and the bulk of our security personnel are found largely in towns and cities. Our security personnel are hardly available in rural communities. That is why kidnappers specialize in kidnapping people from remote areas, lonely roads and low-density environments.

State Police is the answer to the current policing disparity. We have been relying only on the Nigeria Police Force since independence and have not been able to solve our growing security problems largely for two reasons (a) the number of policemen available for duty is too few for our population. It has failed to meet the United Nations prescription of one policeman to 400 residents (b) Most of the policemen are largely located in towns and cities and take instructions only from far away Abuja. They are hardly available in rural areas. When they are found in rural areas there must be some VIPs around. The evidence that we need State Police is already on ground as most of the states now have one kind of security force or the other. The only difference is that they are not allowed to carry sophisticated arms which are being used freely by terrorists and bandits.

President Bola Tinubu should initiate moves to facilitate the establishment of State Police. If he fails to do this, he will fail to secure this huge country where there are bandits, terrorists, gunmen, kidnappers, armed robbers everywhere

brandishing state of the art weapons of demolition. Nigerians are used to their leaders sending condolence messages to communities where massive killings have occurred. Sometimes they also send relief materials to the survivors and pay hospital bills of those wounded. They always strongly condemn the atrocities and also always promise to get justice for the dead. These are regular, routine rituals, which no longer impress Nigerians. What Nigerians want are solutions to these attacks. They want to feel safe wherever they are in Nigeria, whether in their houses, or farms or churches or mosques or in the streets. That is what they want from their governments, which they are yet to get.

We have too many war fronts in the country. None of the six zones is free from serious cases of insecurity. And the criminals are using very sophisticated arms. Our security operatives are capturing or killing many of them but they seem to be sprouting in large numbers like mushrooms. This ought to worry our security personnel and the

governments, federal and state. The Boko Haram people have been operating in the North east since 2009. They are still there. The attackers in Plateau have been on duty since 2004. They are still there. The South east has become a dangerous flash point for some years now. The South south has become a notorious oil theft region. That puts our oil and gas assets at risk.

Now President Tinubu has been pushing vigorously for investors to come and invest here. Investors prefer to invest their resources where there is peace and stability because peace is the basic minimum requirement for investment. There are other factors that affect investment decisions. Such factors include stable policies, stable energy, ability to repatriate their funds when necessary, favourable taxation policies, a generally favourable operating environment. While all these are very important in investment decisions, peace is a sine qua non. Apart from the killings in Plateau being a tragedy of monumental proportion, the other tragedy is that it is not known if there have been any arrests and convictions since these attacks

started in 2004. Have people been arrested? Have people been tried? Have people been convicted? Have their funders been located? Have their arms suppliers been discovered?

These questions deserve to be answered so that we can find our way to a solution. It is intriguing that these terrorists now have the audacity to send advance notices to communities that they have scheduled for mayhem. That is the peak of impunity.



I know that there has been a long-standing quarrel between indigenes and settlers in Plateau State. The indigenes belong to a different tribe from the settlers. They also belong to different religions. So, the problem seems to be how they can live together in peace but it does appear that, like Israel and Palestine, they do not want to live together peacefully. Each seems to have an agenda of ethnic cleansing. That is what has led to the pogrom since 2004. The problem is that when there is a conflict, no one wants to operate within the circle of reason. Combatants behave like the elephant because whatever the traffic light may say the elephant has the right of way. Most of the people being killed are just plain innocent people who are not involved in the high wire politics of the political class. So, the question is "How does the mindless massacre of these innocent people help anyone's cause or solve a n y b o d y ' s p r o b l e m ? No answer.