

POGROM ON THE PLATEAU

By Austin Oboh



- * **Over 200 massacred**
- * **MBF fears gov't complicity**
- * **Nigerians demand probe**

On Sunday, the eve of Christmas, Nigeria recorded yet another case of pogrom carried out by bandits in three local government areas of Plateau State, now famously referred to as a killing field on account of the numerous mass Killings that have taken place in that part of the country in the last few years. The present case is not only noted for its remarkably horrifying scale but also for the ease with which the murderers carried out their act at a time when authorities had assured the citizens repeatedly that they were in full control of the security situation in all

troublesome parts of the country. Several questions have been asked concerning the failure of the military and security agencies to respond to the cries of the attacked communities and calls are now being made for full investigations into the incident, given the widely expressed suspicion that some form of conspiracy may have been involved in the security disaster.

Recall that on Sunday, gunmen stormed Ndun, Ngyong, Murfet, Makunday, Tamiso, Chiang, Tahore, Gawarba, Dares, Meyenga, Darwat, and Butura Kampani villages in the Barkin Ladi, Mangu and Bokkos areas of the state

burning houses and shooting residents. On Tuesday, the Chairman of Community Peace Observers in the Bokkos Local Government Area, Mallai, told journalists that "over 150 people were killed in the attacks." He said in Bokkos town alone, more than 10,000 people were taking refuge in churches, mosques, schools, and private residences. The state governments said over 115 people were killed, while the police put the death toll at 96. In an interview on Channels television on Tuesday, the state governor, Caleb Mutfwang, stated: "This has indeed been a very gory Christmas for us. We have had to celebrate with a heavy heart. Just when people had finished preparing for Christmas celebrations, unprovoked attacks were unleashed on several of our communities.

"As I'm talking to you, in Mangun Local Government alone, we buried at least 15 people. So far, this morning, in the Bokkos Local Government, we were counting not less than 100 corpses. I have yet to take stock of that of Barki-Ladi. Most of the communities affected in Barki-Ladi share a border with the Bokkos Local Government." He further disclosed that no fewer than 64 communities in the state had been displaced by terrorists who were occupying schools in the local government area. He said: "When people are dislocated from their villages and they have to run for shelter, now we are struggling to provide shelter for these people that have been displaced and dislocated from their communities. "If they stay away from those communities for a sustained period, the terrorists would come in. As I am talking to you today (Tuesday), in the Riyom Local Government and in Barkin Ladi Local Government, schools have been occupied by these terrorists for almost a number of years now. We have not less than 64 communities that have been displaced and their lands have been taken over by these terrorists."

According to the governor, "Under the last regime, the feeling among people in Plateau State, particularly the victims of these terrorist attacks, is that it looks as if the terrorists were given official government backing to be able to terrorize them because little or nothing was done to repel these attacks. "I can tell you these schools that are being occupied, it didn't just start now, and some of those schools have been occupied in the last three, four, five years. "Children, therefore, in those schools have not been able to go to school. They had to relocate. We even have primary health care centres abandoned because of these terrorists, which means that our health care system is put in jeopardy; what do we need to do? I think this is where the president needs to come in," he added. The governor noted the flaws in the state's security architecture which, he said,

required some tinkering. He added: "The reason we have enjoyed relative peace up until this moment is because of the kind of arrangements we put in place. "But, obviously, it shows that those arrangements are not adequate. "What we have had to do is motivate the security agencies on the ground to make sure that they perform optimally. "And I would say to some extent that I give credit to the Nigerian Army, other security agencies, and the mobile police that have been deployed to the conflict areas.

"Sometimes, when you think you are achieving the target, you probably relax a little bit, because, for me, security is not the presence of security personnel; it is the absence of conflict. "Unfortunately, we have had to also engage in a lot of non-kinetic methods. We have had engagements with community leaders to identify potential areas of conflict and nip them in the bud. "We have been trying to build communal harmony and, to a large extent, we have succeeded. But, with the breach that we have experienced in the last few days, it means that some people are not happy with the progress we have made." The governor expressed sadness over the breakdown of the peace pact signed by the indigenous communities and Fulani leaders. He disclosed that the attacks were well coordinated and executed with heavy weaponry even as he admitted that unraveling the masterminds was beyond him. The Plateau State Police Command on Tuesday disclosed that a total of 96 persons were killed while 221 houses were set ablaze during the attacks. The state Commissioner of Police, Okoro Alawari, disclosed this in a statement signed by the Command's spokesman, Alfred Alabo. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu condemned the atrocious act and directed security agencies to scout for and apprehend the culprits. Describing the incident as a "primitive and heinous" attack, Tinubu said, "These envoys of death, pain, and sorrow will not escape justice." He also deployed a high-power delegation of well-armed



operational forces to the troubled areas to prevent further attacks.

The president, in a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Ajuri Ngelale, ordered the immediate mobilisation of relief resources for the surviving victims of the cruel attacks as well as medical treatment for the wounded. The Chairman of the Northern States Governors' Forum and governor of Gombe State, Muhammadu Yahaya, has described as reprehensible and heinous, the attack on communities within Bokokos and Barkin-Ladi Local Government Areas of Plateau State. Yahaya, on behalf of the 19 Northern governors, expressed his deepest condolences to the affected families and communities, as well as the government and people of Plateau State, in a statement signed by the Director-General, Press Affairs, Ismaila Misilli. Part of the statement read: "It is reprehensible and disheartening to hear of the loss of over 100 lives and destruction of properties that occurred during these attacks, especially during a time when residents were preparing to celebrate the festive season. "Such acts of violence are not only cowardly but also run counter to the spirit of unity and coexistence that our region upholds. "We must all prioritise peace and harmonious living in our



communities. Now, more than ever, we must reaffirm our commitment to peaceful coexistence and solidarity regardless of our differences. "We must unite in our commitment to peace and security, and stand firm against all forms of violence and division." The NSGF chairman commended Governor Mutfwang for his leadership and responsible handling of the situation in the aftermath of the attacks, assuring him that the forum stands united in solidarity with him in the face of adversity and will work together towards ensuring peace in Plateau State.

Expressing pains over the attack, the Northern Elders Forum condemned the attacks on the plateau communities, the latest in a series of coordinated attacks, rampant killings, and mass displacements that have plagued the northern region. In a statement signed by the NEF Convener, Prof Ango Abdullahi, the forum stated that it had reasons to suspect the government's operational

methods, while raising concerns over the inability of the military to prevent the killings, despite claiming to have received 36 distress calls from different locations in the state. The group stated: "NEF strongly condemns this devastating act and expresses its heartfelt condolences to the families affected by this heinous crime. "It is deeply distressing to witness the continuous deterioration of security in the conflict-affected areas of the North, which has led to countless lives being lost and a pervasive sense of fear and instability amongst the communities. "Moreover, NEF expresses concern over the inability of the military to prevent the Christmas Eve killings, despite claiming to have promptly responded to 36 distress calls from different locations in Plateau State in the 48 hours leading up to Christmas. "This highlights the Forum's growing suspicions regarding the efficacy and sufficiency of the government's operational methods.

"NEF questions whether the strategies employed by the government are flawed or grossly inadequate, given the audacious regularity and ease with which the attackers operate across the northern region." While also raising concerns over the loss of lives of two persons, and the kidnap of 25 others, including the wife of the head of Ruwan Dorawa village in Zamfara State, Abdullahi demanded an investigation into the security lapses that resulted in the kidnap, adding that the report must be made public, while those responsible held accountable.

The Middle-Belt Forum accused the federal government and the security forces of complicity in the massacre of the villagers. In a statement signed by the MBF president, Bitrus Pogu, the forum stated that the government has known the hideout from which the terrorists launch their attacks but have refused to take action, thereby leaving the innocent citizens in danger. "Section 14(b) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, stipulates that 'the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government.' "Conversely the unrelenting massacre of our people in the Middle-Belt States particularly on Sunday on the Plateau has

shown without any vestige of pessimism that the government and security forces are complicit in the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous ethnic nationalities that are not part of the Sokoto Caliphate. "It is no longer news that the hideout from which these insurgents/terrorists launch their attacks on the States of Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba and Southern Kaduna is known to Government and security forces for decades yet they have deliberately fortified this evil theatre from any destruction thus providing a safe haven for these terrorists to smuggle arms, train their mercenaries and unleash unimaginable terror on innocent citizens without any provocation whatsoever. "Mahanga a forest which lies at the foot of the hills of Bokokos L.G.A. of Plateau State and borders Wamba L.G.A of Nasarawa State to the south, is the infamous launching ground of all attacks against our people in the last two decades and fully known to

"The plight of Ethnic Nationalities in the States of Nasarawa, Gombe, Adamawa, Borno, Yobe, Kebbi, Bauchi, Kaduna, Niger, Kwara, Taraba, Benue, Plateau, Kogi and Abuja (FCT), who are daily butchered like chickens ricochet the imbalance and unfairness of the northern oligarchy to our indigenous people of the Middle-Belt who are daily treated as lesser humans without dignity and worth which is an inherent endowment of God on all humanity. "We shall never again accept the ignoble and inferior status imposed on our people by the caliphate and Nigerian government acting in connivance with security forces to drive us out of our ancestral homeland. "This is in view of the fact that our forefathers who fought to keep this country united are warriors who deserve nothing but respect and honour."

government and security forces. "The complicity of the government and security forces is that they have shielded this autonomous Fulani community which is known to house all manner of weapons including missiles that are used to destabilize the peaceful coexistence of the country without ever invading and uprooting them from the forest. "This same tactic of nurturing and fortifying terrorist camps finds expression in the Mandara Hills in Borno and Alagarno where the military moved the entire residents of over 11,000 people from Sabon Gari leaving the whole road between Biu and Dambua for the terrorists to operate freely even collecting tolls on the highway. "This implicates the government of collusion with these armed non-State actors to kill and maim our people with the intent to eclipse our heritage and existence." Pogu also stated that the continuous attacks have also led to political suppression of the people of the middle belt, leaving them defenseless and vulnerable. "Our resolve to confront headlong this abysmal and surreptitious extinction of our people is anchored on our quest for the liberation of Middle-Belt states from the oppressive and tyrannical manipulations of external forces that have retarded development in our region. "We shall take the bull by the horn to defend our people as the last option left to us predicated on our land, our people and our heritage. "It is pertinent to note that the divide and rule tactic over the years employed by our adversaries has accounted for the political subjugation of our people thereby limiting our access to economic power which concomitantly render us vulnerable and defenseless in the face of carefully orchestrated stratagems to eclipse our heritage and continued survival.

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The MBF also called on the governors to take up the responsibility of protecting the lives of their citizens using the vigilantes in the communities under attacks, adding that 'state police is the only option to secure the country from a full blown war.

The Christian Association of Nigeria similarly condemned the attacks on the Plateau communities. In a press statement, CAN President, Archbishop Daniel



Okoh, condoled with the bereaved communities, and described the attacks as "a direct assault on our shared values of peace, unity and mutual respect." While commending the quick intervention of the military and the state governor, Okoh urged security to intensify intelligence gathering, to pre-empt and forestall future attacks, adding that they must move from reactive to preventive measures.

Part of the statement read: "We mourn with the families, friends, and communities who tragically lost their loved ones in the villages of Ruku, Hurum, Darwat, Mai Yanga Sabo, NTV, and Lisham Kwahasnat community in Wase LGA. We stand with you at this time of grief, and our prayers go out to you for comfort and strength. "We condemn these acts of violence in the strongest possible terms. The burning down of houses, and worship centres, and the destruction of properties worth millions of naira is not only a criminal act but also a direct assault on our shared values of peace, unity, and mutual respect. Such acts have no place in our society and must not be allowed to prevail. "We commend the swift intervention of the military and the deployment of a joint police and military task force to restore peace and prevent further lawlessness in the affected communities. "However, while appreciating these immediate responses, we urge the security agencies to intensify their efforts in intelligence gathering and proactive interventions to pre-empt and forestall these types of dastardly acts in the future. Our people deserve to live in peace, and it is high time we moved from reactive to preventive measures."

The CAN president also urged Nigerians to remember the victims' families and reach out to them in the spirit of the festive season, while calling on citizens to shun all forms of violence and embrace peace and unity. In his reaction the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'ad Abubakar III, condemned the Christmas Eve killings and faulted security agencies for their failure in intelligence gathering which may have prevented them from averting the killings. Abubakar called on the government and security agencies to be more proactive and scale up its intelligence gathering techniques because "the bandits and terrorists are always a step ahead." The Sultan, who is also the President, Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, stated this in a goodwill message at the closing of the 80th National Islamic Vacation Course which was held at the Abubakar Tafawa Balewa Stadium, Bauchi. He said: "We have problems of insecurity. Just a couple of days back, there was this clash in Plateau (State) where over 100 plus lives were lost. Why do we keep on having these clashes, why do we keep on having these deaths caused by ourselves? "A couple of weeks back, the Tudun Biri issue (in Kdauna State) is still fresh in our minds, and now the one in



Plateau. "We always condemn such things but after condemning such activities by these bandits and criminals, what are the roles of the governments who are supposed to protect our lives and property? "Why can't we be proactive and stop such attacks before they happen? What happened to our intelligence gathering mechanisms? Can anybody tell me that nobody knew that such attacks were coming up? "In various places, whether it is Sokoto, Birni Kebbi or in Kaduna or anywhere. Have we lost our sense of gathering information to avert any of such heinous crimes? We must ask our governments to up the game because these bandits are always a step ahead." Abubakar also warned against politicising insecurity in the country saying this was dangerous and the worst way to go.

Meanwhile, the Northern Senators' Forum has also condemned the pogrom and called for full scale investigations. The northern senators, in a statement by their spokesperson, Senator Suleiman Sumaila, urged the authorities to commence an investigation into the mayhem and bring the perpetrators of the dastardly act to book. Sumaila said that the Senators had expressed their deepest condolences to the affected families, loved ones, the people, and the Government of Plateau State over the killings. "Their immense loss is a collective grief, and we stand united in our determination to seek justice. "In our legislative role, we strongly condemn this reprehensible act and call upon the authorities to promptly initiate a comprehensive investigation." Despite the general feeling of shock and horror in the country, some commentators have expressed the view that nothing will come out of the investigations which the federal government has promised to carry out, noting that the latest act follows the pattern of ethnic cleansing in the zone. But the federal government under President Tinubu has the opportunity to prove cynics wrong by ensuring the arrest of the perpetrators of the killings and their prosecution. That is the only action of the government that may reassure the victims of terror and banditry in the Middle Belt and other affected parts of Nigeria.