

ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ACTION / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH, NIGERIA

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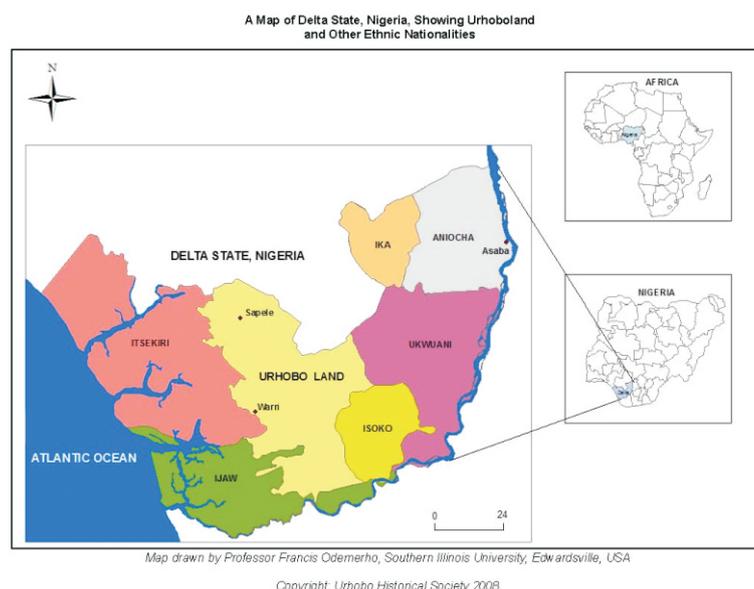
ENVIRONMENTAL TESTIMONIES 2009/02

LAMENTATIONS FROM GBARAMATU BOMBINGS

From: Warri

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By: Rita Osarogiagbon



“They bombed everywhere and everything. They don't have feelings at all. I was lucky to have my children and husband alive. My neighbour lost his pregnant wife in the incidence. She was my friend too.” - Evelyn Emmanuel

On May 14, 2009 at about noon, Gbaramatu Kingdom, Delta State, was in a festive mood. There had been an influx of guests into the community from far and near. They all came to witness the presentation of the Staff of Office to the Pere of Gbaramatu Kingdom, His Royal Majesty Ogie the third.

The palace located in Oporoza was filled with well-wishers as the day also marked the King's one year anniversary. Suddenly, three low flying helicopters were seen approaching the Kingdom.

The community people initially thought they were flying dignitaries to the ceremony or that they were part of the glamour for the ceremony. They were wrong. Dead wrong!

The three choppers were actually gunships of the Joint Military Task Force, on a mission to mow down the Gbaramatu Kingdom. Suddenly the gunships started bombing everywhere, the King's palace inclusive. The JTF, ostensibly on a mission of searching for militants and rescuing hostages, embarked on massive military assault on Gbaramatu Kingdom made up of 163 communities, villages and hamlets. The military deployed its most sophisticated weaponry against the hapless residents of the community

The military machines unleashed on the communities include four helicopter gunboats for aerial bombing, two Naval Ships; *NNS Obula* and *NNS Nwanba* and large troop of soldiers.

Apart from Oporoza, Okerenkoko, Kurutie, Kokodiagbene and Kunukuma have all suffered indiscriminate aerial assault from the JTF forces. Eyewitness accounts say the number of civilian casualties may be in thousands. Infact, reports say the latest military offensive has made the attack on Odi where close to 2873 civilians lost their lives a child's play.



The attack on Gbaramatu has brought huge humanitarian crisis to the region. Besides, an estimated 20, 000 persons are believed to be trapped in the forests. Victims have not been able to receive medical attention while some hospitals offering medicare to survivors have also been raided by JTF.

The bombardment of the Kingdom is still on-going and there are fears that JTF plans to extend the offensive to other states. At the time of this report access to Gbaramatu Kingdom has been cordoned off. The entire Kingdom has been closed to the media, NGOs and relief

agencies.

ERA/FoEN spoke to some of the survivors and displaced persons in camps in the Warri area. Their accounts are chilling and sombre.

Horror Testimonies of survivors

“Most of the students like me who tried to escape during the deadly incident are dead. Some in the streets, forests...they were killed by the bombs. I lost my mother and six of my brothers in the incidence. Two of my three sisters are still trapped in the forest. The place is too dangerous for them to come out now. They can't cross with boat and they can't risk swimming. The JTF people have blocked the waterways. One of my sisters has been missing. Nobody seems to know her whereabouts. The military people were using their helicopter chopper to destroy everything we have ever had. I saw war with my naked eyes. I saw my mum's dead body. I saw my brothers lying helpless on the ground (here she started sobbing). Everyone was running without direction. It is a bitter experience. They are wicked people. They are heartless. I don't have any family member as militants. We used to survive with fishing. It was through fishing business that my mum pays our school fees. Why will the FG send military men to kill us, to destroy our community? We don't have anywhere else to go now. No home, no place to go. My OND certificate, my only hope for a better tomorrow has been destroyed”.

- Miss Peres Popo, 21, from Okporoza .



“I was sleeping but suddenly I woke up due to the endless sound of gunshot. It was after twelve in the afternoon. I was confused. When I peeped through my window, I saw people running and screaming. It was a hot afternoon. I slept with only my pants on. I had to run without even knowing that I was naked I was not conscious of my nakedness. It was when I managed to find my way to Warri town that I was able to clothe myself with the help of a relative. I am afraid I have still not seen my younger sister. Her name is Mary. We started running together from the house but at a point I was ahead of her. After some time, I didn't notice her again. I pray she is alive. She is my only sister.

- Mrs. Vero Idolo ,27, mother of two.

“They bombed everywhere and everything. They don't have feelings at all. I was lucky to have my children and husband alive. My neighbour lost his pregnant wife in the incidence. She was my friend too.” - Evelyn Emmanuel.

“We were warming up for the king's party. All of a sudden we started seeing helicopters roving in the air. The next thing something was dropping from it and it was landing as fire and exploding and burning and killing. I was scared stiff . I have never seen this kind of thing in my life.

-Timi Tonfawei

" We were employed as caterers from Warri to come and cook prior to the Amaseikumor (King's purification) festival which they also say will mark the presentation of staff of office to the King of Gbaramatu kingdom. As we were cooking, the next thing we heard gunshots...I thought it was part of the celebration until I started seeing fire everywhere, then it wasn't fun anymore. My madam's leg got broken in the process. It was God that saved her. She would have been dead by now. We managed to carry her into the bush. She is still on admission. The doctor said she won't be able to walk in 3 months." - **Tunbra Ubebe from Oporoza community**

"It was around 12 o'clock when I heard that army people have come to our village. Before we could understand what they came to do, houses had started burning. I saw dead bodies littering my street. I started running for safety. Some of us entered the river. Everybody scattered. Till today I don't know why they are doing this to us oo." - **Evelyn Sunday from Okerenkoko**



"I came to the king's party when the aeroplane came and started shooting and shooting. I was seeing big smoke and fire. I thought I was dreaming. It was like a film. My younger brother was wounded by the bomb blast." - **Patrick Tuwe from Oporoza**

"It was the forest that protected us. My parents and I were in the forest for two days before we were lucky to find our way out." - **Rachael Mala.**

"I saw plane scattering every where. It's the 9th day today, I have not seen any of my brothers. Sister, help us to ask the Federal Government why they would ask the military to come and be bombing us and our villages." - **Ebi Samuel From Edeuvba**

"I sell provisions. I also run a beer parlour. I don't have anything again of my own. Even these clothes I am wearing I was given by some good Samaritans. I have lost every thing I worked hard to get for years. It saddens my heart to know that I am in this state. I have cried and cried. I know my God will ask them why." - **My name is Rose Tuwe from Iyakufinkpon**

"As I dey talk with u now my pikin dey for hospital. I don't have money to discharge her. My body is not sound. I fainted at a point. I don't know where to start from because I could not pick anything." - **Mrs. Ebi Sunny from Oporoza**

"I ran for my dear life without picking a pin. They have left us in pain. I slept in the bush till the following day after which we passed through the river before we got here." - **Monica Oyoroko a tailor from Okerenkoko,**

"I sell wrappers, jewelleries with engine boat from one community to another. It was then I started hearing gunshots from everywhere. All of us in the boat had to dive into the river." - **Tina Agbonifo**

“ It is from fishing that I derive my source of livelihood. Now they have taken all from me. They have locked the waterways. Where do I go, what do I do? They (JTF men) will get the reward of their wickedness.”

-Dwenu Azagbini



ERA demands

- The FG should withdraw JTF operatives from Gbaramatu Kingdom and the entire Niger Delta region.
- Federal Government should engage in genuine dialogue with the peoples of the Niger Delta as gun duels will not resolve the deep political issues
- Adequate provision of medical treatment and relief materials to all displaced persons
- Grant Immediate access to NGOs and other observers to Gbaramatu Kingdom
- Compensation for all affected persons in the attacks.
- Reconstruction of all bombed buildings and communities