

THE GUARDIAN, Thursday, March 25, 2004

TWO stories on the front page of *The Guardian*, Thursday, March 4, 2004, arrested me for an unusually long time. The stories, the first a calamity, the second a lamentation, made an instant and shattering impact on my emotions.

The reason might be that they were appearing on the same page or that I was also reading between the lines. I heard myself asking the desperate question: What exactly can we do to halt this descent to the unknown? The first story was titled "Gunmen attack Akume's convoy, kill PDP Chief, Agom", while the second carried the caption "Enahoro, Soyinka form a group to check misrule". We start with the March 4 calamity and end with Wole Soyinka's lamentation.

Governor George Akume of Benue State, a member of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), was travelling from his headquarters in Makurdi to Abuja on Wednesday, March 3, 2004, when his convoy of cars was attacked by "suspected bandits" along the Lafia-Akwanga road in the neighbouring Nasarawa State. In Nigeria, a bandit is an armed robber. The time of attack was given as 7.15 a.m.; that is, broad daylight.

The road is a major one, leading to the nation's capital. The governor's mission was "to attend a meeting at the Presidency" according to *The Guardian* report, or "to attend a PDP meeting", according to another. The attack claimed two lives: Chief Andrew Agom, a former Managing Director of the Nigeria Airways and a member of PDP's Board of Trustees; and Sergeant Joseph Ngam, the governor's police guard. Some other people in the governor's entourage sustained "varying degrees of wound". *The Guardian* reported that "Governor Akume, who was in the same car with Agom, escaped death by the whiskers", but elsewhere in the report the paper quoted the Chief Press Secretary to the governor as saying that "Agom and the police orderly who were in the escort car were

killed in the shooting spree".

My questions here may be called trivial or immaterial. Yet they are crucial if we must understand the types of forms of armed "banditry" now ravaging the country, their motivations and primary targets, and, beyond that, their perpetrators. If Agom and the governor's police orderly were together in the escort car, it follows that either the governor, Agom and police orderly were in one car, and the bandits killed Agom and the police orderly, with the governor escaping death "by the whiskers", or there were two "Agoms", one with the governor, and the other with the police orderly, in separate cars. A newsmagazine later confirmed that the former was the case. But in a situation where everyone, including the "bereaved", the investigators and the political authorities, is under suspicion this confirmation does not settle the matter.

My second problem is this: The attack took place in broad daylight along a major road. Governors normally travel in convoys with sirens blaring. The "bandits", were likely to have known that they were attacking the convoy of a big person. Did the convoy run into the armed robbers who were operating in the area or was the attack a planned ambush? If the latter, what was the motive: robbery or assassination? Again, if the latter, who was the target, or who were the targets? Since the Agom tragedy, several other, even more bizarre high-profile killings have taken place in the land. There have also been allegations of high-profile threats of assassination. Each raises similar questions.

At 3.00 a.m. on Sunday, March 7, 2004, barely four days after the murder of Andrew Agom, the Chairman of the Kogi State Independent Electoral Commission, Chief Philip Olorunipa, was shot dead in his bedroom by "suspected assassins". The report said that the killers, on entering the

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By Edwin Madunagu

premises, went straight to their victim's bedroom and shot him. They knew where the target was, and his police guard could not help him. The police immediately announced the arrest of three suspects, including a leading member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). A few days earlier, a prospective candidate in the March 27 local government elections in the state was similarly killed. About four weeks earlier, on Friday, February 6, 2004, Chief Aminu-Sari Dikibo, the National Vice-Chairman of PDP for South-South, was killed by gunmen" later identified by some authorities as "armed robbers", a few kilometres from Asaba, capital of Delta State. Like Agom, Dikibo was on his way to a meeting.

The Guardian of Sunday, March 7, 2004 carried, on its front page, a story: Kalu on Death Threat: Enough is Enough. It was a report of an interview with Governor Orji Uzor Kalu of Abia State the previous day. In that interview the governor informed the nation of a letter he recently wrote to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria complaining that the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the ruling PDP had threatened to eliminate him (the governor) the same way Chief Bola Ige, a former Federal Minister of Justice was eliminated over three years ago. The governor cited his deputy as a witness to the open verbal threat. In the same interview Governor Kalu said that Dikibo had complained of threats to his life three days before he (Dikibo) was killed. The PDP leadership, of which the governor was supposed to be a member, immediately denied the governor's allegations. The governor, in turn, denounced the PDP's denial, and raised a general alarm of the existence, in the country, of a murderous gang.

The Abia State Deputy Governor first

confirmed his part of the story but later repudiated it - after holding some meetings with some highly placed people in Abuja. As the controversy raged, the federal authorities withdraw the business licenses of Governor Kalu. About the same time, the Deputy Governor released the content of the memorandum he sent to the governor on the "death threat". The document did not mention "threat". We shall hear and see more.

In a two-part article, another letter to President Obasanjo *The Guardian*, February 24 and 25, 2004, Professor Niyi Osundare told the president: "In the reckoning of most Nigerians, you are the most arrogant, most insensitive, most callous, and most self-righteous and hypocritical ruler that this unfortunate country has ever been saddled with in its hapless saga of misrule".

He then illustrated: "You met a litre of petrol selling for N21; it now goes for a whopping N42 in a few places and twice as much in many others. As if this was not enough you topped it all with a N1.50 levy misnamed "fuel tax". Three tubers of medium-size yam costing N80.00 when you assumed office in 1999 now costs N300.00; a bag of rice which was N3,200.00 then now costs N4,800.00; a bag of cement was N550.00 in 1999; now it goes for N1,000.00".

Etubom Bassey Ekpo Bassey complemented the list: "Transparency International has moved us from the disgraceful position of the 27th most corrupt country in the world under Abacha to No.2 under Obasanjo; the World Health Organisation says our healthcare system is the worst but one in the entire world; as UNDP insists, whereas a whopping 48.5 per cent of Nigerians lived under poverty line in 1998, Chief Obasanjo quickly achieved the higher figure of 70 per cent in 2001".

Bassey lamented: "Today, the picture of pillage and plunder of the vast majority by a

handful of their countrymen and women is complete; so is the cognate picture of utter destitution, rampaging poverty, violent crimes, unspeakable insecurity, of blood and death everywhere.

And Osundare continued: "Dear President, how many more riots, how many more corpses, do you need to see in the streets before you know that your social and economic "policies" are killing the people you vowed to protect? Deregulation. Monetisation. Privatisation. Why is your emphasis always on price increase than the efficient running of Nigeria's refineries? Concerning privatisation, who stands to profit by the sale of our major national holdings if not the already rich and their friends and associates? How can the so many Nigerians perishing from today's pain become the inheritors of tomorrow's gain?"

As I said earlier, some prominent Nigerians, including Chief Anthony Enahoro and Professor Wole Soyinka, were reported to have formed a group "to save Nigeria from sliding into civilian dictatorship and one-party state". At a press conference in Lagos on March 3, 2004, Soyinka, on behalf of the group, Citizen Forum, denounced the "increased intolerance of dissent, a contempt for constitutional procedures, abuse of police powers, a flagrant debasement of the electoral process, cynical manipulation of the judiciary, leading to a loss of public confidence, an on-going agenda for the destruction of intellectual institutions, the usurpation of popular will by Mafioso conspiracies, arrogant insensitivity to mass economic realities, erosion of checks and balances entrenched in the separation of powers".

He then made an indirect call: "Irrespective of ideological leanings or party allegiances, all mature citizens with a sense of civic worth must surely feel demeaned or, at the very least, concerned by the predator mentality that now pervades all tiers of governance".

These reports, taken together, present a very grim picture of our country, and constitute one of the most vehement denunciations of the present regime I have so far seen. The question is: What exactly can we do?