The Tears, Fears of Niger Delta Refugees

Contributed by Administrator
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They are about 3,000 and each one of them has lost somebody or something very dear

Queen Ejoor, a middle-aged woman from Gbaramatu in the Warri South West Local Government Area of Delta State, looked tired, angry, hungry and forlorn in the morning of Wednesday May 27. She stared into in the air as she sat on a long desk at Ewein Primary School, Ogbe -Ijoh which has become her place of refuge. Ejoor is one of the indigenes of Gbaramatu kingdom who has been displaced from their homes since May 15, when the Joint Military Task Force, JTF, bombarded the area in the wake of their bloody clash with the Niger Delta militants. She was in tears as she told Newswatch that she was devastated by the incident because she lost her husband, her child and her brother to the JTF onslaught against the militants. Ejoor narrated the harrowing experience she passed through following the attack by the JTF. “We were celebrating the coronation of our traditional ruler, and suddenly, we saw helicopter hovering over our heads. The next thing we heard was the heavy sound of bomb-gboom!gboom!!gboom!!! It was as if hell was let loose and we ran helter-skelter to escape the bombardment.” According to her, she had stayed in the bush for five days wearing only one blouse and a wrapper before she was brought to the camp for displaced persons at Ogbe-Ijoh. Margaret Lokpa, another middle-aged woman from Gbaramatu, is also one of the displaced persons currently taking refuge in the Ogbe-Ijoh camp. Unlike Ejoor, she was lucky that her husband is still alive. But her worry is that she had not been able to locate any of her five children. She said none of her children was at home when the JTF struck and that the bomb destroyed her house. Lokpa told Newswatch that she and her husband escaped death by the whiskers because they were staying outside their house when it was hit by the bomb. Her husband was not staying in the camp because all the men decided to stay inside the bush to avoid harassment by the JTF. “They have killed thousands of our men because soldiers believe that every Gbaramatu man is a militant. That is why there is no single man in this camp,” Lokpa told Newswatch. She said since they came to the camp, they have been fed and catered for by officials of the National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA, the Red Cross and the Delta State Rehabilitation Committee which donated relief materials to them. Rose Aduke, 32, from Oporoza admitted that these agencies have greatly assisted them with relief materials. But she was yet to get over her shocking experience in the hands of the JTF because she had not located her husband and some of her relations. Aduke wept profusely as she told Newswatch that the oil wealth in their community has become a curse rather than a blessing to them. “Is it not because of the oil in the Niger Delta that they are killing and maiming our men? I don’t even know whether my husband is dead or alive. I feel sad that we have been turned into refugees in our own land,” Aduke said. She explained that she was at the palace of Godwin Benenimbo, traditional ruler of Gbaramatu kingdom, when it was bombed by the JTF. As soon as the bomb exploded at the palace, all those who came for the celebration of the staff of office recently given to the traditional ruler by Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan ran helter-skelter. According to her, the traditional ruler’s chief cook, whose name is Atu, was one of those killed by the bomb instantly. Aduke said as she tried to escape through the bush, she got injured on her right leg and broke her waist. She was lucky to have escaped with her five children, including her one-year-old baby. “I carried this baby on my back as we ran into the bush where we passed the night for two days before we arrived the camp in Ogbe-Ijoh,” Aduke told Newswatch. For Mary Alfred from Ekrangogo, it was a horrible experience. She explained that the most harrowing experience was that she witnessed some pregnant women give birth inside the bush without maternity care. “I appeal to the soldiers to leave us alone. I also appeal to our youths who are into militancy to allow peace to reign. We don’t want to experience this type of bombing again,” she said. Alfred, however, commended the officials of NEMA for bringing relief materials to them. But she lamented the condition of the camp which she described as deplorable. According to her, many of them sleep on bare floor while others sleep on top of the long desks meant for primary school pupils. “We are suffering greatly in this camp. At night, mosquitoes feast on us because there are no doors and windows in the classrooms where we sleep. We beg the government to restore peace in our community so that we can return to our homes,” she said. Air-Vice Marshal Mohammed Audu- Bida, director-general of NEMA, visited the camp on May 23, with his officials. During the visit, Audu-Bida distributed relief materials to them. Some of the items distributed to displaced persons by NEMA include bags of rice, beans, garri, salt, mattresses, gallons of cooking oil, mats, buckets, cooking utensils, disinfectants and children’s wears. Audu-Bida said the visit was meant to demonstrate that the federal government was deeply touched that Nigerians were displaced in their own country and hoped that the relief materials would alleviate their plight. “We are deeply saddened by this unfortunate development. The situation is pathetic. We pray that normality returns as soon as possible so that people can go back to their homes and resume their normal lives,” he said. After distributing the relief materials, the NEMA boss, accompanied by government officials and community leaders, also visited the JTF headquarters in Warri. At the JTF headquarters, they held discussions with Major General Sarkin-Yarkin Bello, the JTF commander, on how to take relief materials to people who were still trapped in the creeks of Gbaramatu. They also discussed the process of restoring normality to the communities in Gbaramatu. Last Tuesday NEMA officials were escorted by the JTF to drop relief materials in Gbaramatu. When Newswatch visited the Ogbe-Ijoh camp last Wednesday, officials of NEMA were still there, providing succour to the displaced persons. Also present at the camp were the officials of the Delta State Rehabilitation Committee as well as the Warri, South-West Local Government Rehabilitation Committee. Onimode Bandele, zonal co-ordinator of NEMA in the South-East Zone who was drafted to Ogbe-Ijoh because of the crisis, told Newswatch that the agency would continue to do its best for the displaced persons. “When a man is displaced from his natural abode, the tendency is that little things trigger actions and reactions. But since we came in, we have tried to build confidence for the displaced persons,” he said. He explained that in

addition to the relief materials, NEMA was trying to resurface the borehole in Ogbe-Ijoh to provide them with water and also rehabilitate the toilet facilities in the camp. Kingsley Otuaro, chairman, Delta State Rehabilitation Committee, told Newswatch that government was making frantic efforts to alleviate the suffering of the displaced persons. He said that crucial meetings were being held to persuade the JTF to reopen the waterways so that displaced persons can gradually return to their homes. Rose Tulu, leader of the Legislative Arm of the Warri South-West Local Government and head, Committee For the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons, said initially, the number of persons in camp was about 3,000 but by last Wednesday, it had gone down to 1,800. Most of the persons in camp were women and children. In order to facilitate the cooking and serving of food for displaced persons, Tulu constituted some women groups who are taking charge of affairs in the camp. The displaced persons were cooking their food within the camp when Newswatch visited there last week. When the food was ready, the women and their children queued up like refugees to collect their rations. It was very clear that although government and agencies like NEMA and the Red Cross were doing their best to cater for the displaced persons, many of them were still not comfortable with the condition in the camp. One of their complaints was the absence of bathrooms where the women could take their bath. As a result, most of the women had to go to the Ogbe-Ijoh village to look for where to take their bath every morning. There is also no electricity at the camp. The place is always in darkness at night and therefore not conducive for the hapless women and their children. Many of the children in the camp looked unkempt as they played around wearing only pants. Many Ijaw leaders have condemned the JTF for literally turning their people into refugees in Nigeria. A recent statement issued by Ijaw Elders and Leaders jointly signed by Edwin Clark, Ijaw national leader, and A W Obianime, president, Ijaw National Congress, INC, condemned “the unprovoked military attack” on their communities. “The deployment of highly sophisticated military weaponry and arsenal to engage hapless villagers and towns to aerial and amphibious bombardments in a scale never ever witnessed in even the Nigerian Civil War is callous, inhuman, dastardly barbaric and insensitive. We condemn this unprovoked attack in the strongest term possible,” Ijaw leaders stated. They alleged that the action of the JTF was tantamount to genocide. “The burning, destruction, complete razing of Okerenkoko, Oporoza, Kunukunuma, Peretorukorigbene, Kurutie and many other communities, and killing and maiming of innocent people including women and children amount to systemic annihilation of an ethnic race, and this is simply genocide.” The Ijaw leaders were emphatic that it was criminal and unjustified for the JTF to have declared full military operations on Ijaw communities in the guise of undertaking a search and rescue mission for hostages and missing personnel. But Colonel Rabe Abubakar, co-ordinator of the media campaign of JTF in Warri, told Newswatch that it was wrong for Ijaw leaders to equate their action to genocide. Rather, he accused the militants in Camp 5 led by Government Ekpomupolo alias Tompolo of attacking the JTF unprovoked at the Chanoni Creek, thereby leading to the counter attack by the soldiers. “We are not targeting anybody or any ethnic group. We targeted only the militants in Camp 5 who attacked our men and hijacked the expatriates,” Abubakar told Newswatch. Even though the JTF attack was targeted at mainly the militants, there were many civilian casualties. One of the casualties was Stephen Ari, the 98-year-old Amaokusowei of Kokodiagbene community in Gbaramatu, who died last Monday following the shock he received from JTF attack. The old man was said to have fled the community when there was a stampede as a result of JTF’s onslaught. He was trapped in the bush for four days before his children eventually found him. By that time, he was already very weak. Although his children took him to a hospital in Warri, he could not survive that traumatic experience. Expectedly, the ordeal of the displaced Gbaramatu people dominated discussions at the 2nd All Niger Delta Assembly held in Port Harcourt, May 23. During the meeting, prominent Niger Delta leaders, including Afred Diette – Spiff, first military governor of old Rivers State, urged the federal government to direct the JTF to allow unrestrained access to the Gbaramatu kingdom so that relief materials could be taken to the grieving people of the area. “Adequate process should be immediately established for the rehabiliation of the thousands of displaced persons, even as they should be immediately resettled in their original communities,” the All Niger Delta Assembly stated. By press time last week, there was still tension in Gbaramatu and its environs. Many houses in the area including the palace of their traditional ruler and Tompolo’s house were razed by the JTF. All the villages in Gbaramatu were deserted. Gbaramatu which used to be a beehive of activities was like a Ghost town.