

Today's Martyrs

Resources for understanding current Christian witness and martyrdom

Document

Stop This Madness!

(A Press Statement following the Massacre of Innocent Citizens in Nimbo, by Suspected Fulani Herdsmen)

"A voice is heard in Ramah, lamenting and weeping bitterly: it is Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more." (Jer 31:15).

This passage from the Prophet Jeremiah captures the present mood in Nsukka and, especially, in the hitherto quiet and peaceful farming community of Nimbo in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area. When the news broke about the massacre of innocent, unarmed and defenseless citizens of Nimbo in the early hours of Monday 25 April [2016] by invading armed militants, suspected to be Fulani herdsmen, the first question that popped into my mind was: "Again?"

This was because similar stories had been heard from many parts of the country in recent times, including Abbi, another community in our Diocese, also in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area. The news of the attack was soon followed by a flood of human beings fleeing their homes and emptying into the urban center of Nsukka, many of them scantily clad women clutching only their babies.

Wailing filled the air as vans brought in lifeless bodies of persons who were slaughtered like animals for the crime of having been found in their homes or on the way to their farms. Such scenes sent the minds of the older ones back to similar scenes in 1966, when our people had to flee the places they had considered their homes in other parts of the country, as a result of the first ethnic cleansing in modern African history. The big difference now, 50 years after, is that we are being chased out of our homes in our own land, from our own farms, from our Churches, from our schools and from our village markets. As our people say, if a man is pursued from outside, he runs into his house; but when he is pursued from his house, he has no place to run to.

The most painful aspect of the Nimbo massacre is that it was announced, expected and executed without inhibition - in broad daylight! The State Government is reported to have made attempts to provide security in the area prior to the incident. But what those who lost their dear ones (especially those little babies now blankly staring into an uncertain future, because their fathers

have been senselessly murdered) and all of us want to know is why, as the reports go, the security forces "tactically" withdrew shortly before the attack and why, when they later returned to the scene, there was no attempt to immediately pursue and arrest the perpetrators.

At present, nobody can say with certainty the number of those killed, given that more of those who were badly wounded are still dying and some bodies are still being recovered from the bush where the people had been killed while taking refuge. Today, Nimbo is like a ghost town. It is equally disturbing that whereas the invading militants killed and maimed anybody they could find, the only houses they attacked were Christian religious houses.

They burnt the house of one Pastor and from there headed straight to the residence of the Catholic Priest, where they attempted to burn the house but could not, since they did not find any petrol in the car and a motorcycle parked there, in the generator, and in the containers. When their attempt to break into the house also failed, they fired gunshots into the rooms, in an attempt to kill all those whom they suspected were hiding inside. And we are forced to ask: If these men were only herdsmen, why did they particularly single out Churches for their attack?

Nsukka people are peace-loving people. Why would anybody single them out for this type of massacre? In the name of God, I appeal to my peace-loving people to please remain law abiding and not to take the law into their hands. But even as I do this, I hear them asking aloud: Are there really any laws in this country guaranteeing the safety of our life and property even in our homes? If there are, is there anybody out there ready to enforce them? Or has this become a lawless country where violent persons can kidnap and kill, rob and rape innocent citizens in their homes, on the road, in their farms, at any time of the day or night, unhindered? How are we supposed to react to these threats to our very survival as a people when the Federal Government, who controls the security agencies, seems unwilling to protect us and the State Government appears incapable of defending us, since it has no control over these agencies?

Our young people are asking us why the Police and the Armed Forces of the Federal Government are so swift and sometimes so high-handed in their reaction when unarmed persons march the streets in protest in the South East and so heavy-footed when it comes to stopping the massacre of the South Easterners anywhere in the country, even in their own homes. They are asking whether Boko Haram has actually been weakened or has only been redeployed from the North East to the South East. And we are scratching our heads in vain for the correct answers.

While we wait for these answers, we shout a loud and an absolute "NO!" to any form of violence even in the face of this persistent provocation. Reprisal attacks are not the answer. They are wrong; they are unlawful; they are un-Christian. Besides, we should not give the Police and the Army any excuses for adding to our woes, as they are sure to respond rapidly to any perceived form of aggression on our part.

We appreciate the position taken by President Muhammadu Buhari on this latest war-like attack on a peaceful community and hope that his directives will be carried out promptly. Protection of life and property of citizens is the primary responsibility of government and every other act of governance would lose its meaning if this was not guaranteed. We are consoled by what the President said. But only concrete actions can lead to the return of normalcy in the community. Nimbo and its neighboring communities are among the few remaining farming communities in our area and the herdsmen had earlier chased the people out of their larger farms.

The rains have just started and they had begun work in the smaller farms nearer to their homes. And even from there too they have now been chased out. It is sad that in these hard times, when many have been crushed by the harsh economic conditions in the country, in addition to the loss of loved ones, many of our people are now homeless and all of us will also face the problem of acute food shortage in the near future.

We call on the Federal Government not only to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators of the massacre as well as their sponsors and collaborators, as the President has directed, but also to disarm all those who carry assault rifles publicly when they have no permission to bear arms. Some people predicted that Nigeria would be a failed State by the year 2015. All of us heaved a sigh of relief after the general elections and the smooth handover last year. But any further delay in dealing with this and similar cases all over the country may lead those who made that prediction to affirm that its realization has only been delayed not avoided. If these incessant attacks and raids going on in many parts of the country are not stopped immediately, it may happen that by the time our President has won the war against corruption, there will no longer be any Nigeria left for him to govern.

We thank Governor Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi for the efforts he made to prevent the tragedy and for his timely interventions after, without which more lives would certainly have been lost. We expect, however, that he will use the tools at his disposal to prevent its reoccurrence in any part of the State and to find out why, despite his efforts and prior information, the security agents failed to protect the lives of innocent citizens. To our Senator Chuka Utazi, we say "Gbagaa!", in all the meanings of that word, for what he has been and done for his people during this time of crisis. We also thank the Inspector General of Police Solomon Arase, for promptly visiting Nimbo and for promising to bring those responsible for the massacre to book. But we are forced to wonder whether it does not bother him that some herdsmen in this country are better armed than some of our Policemen. Does it mean that the lives of cattle in some parts of the country are worth more than the lives of human beings in some other parts?

The Catholic Diocese of Nsukka is in mourning for her dead children and in pains for the displaced ones. We are also living in fear because we do not know where and when the armed militants will strike next. In the meantime, we shall do what we can to offer some help to the

displaced persons, relying on the usual generosity of our people. But we have absolute faith in the abiding presence of God among us. In these difficult and trying times, all of us, especially those who have lost dear ones, should know that God is even nearer to us than we thought. Let us turn to him in prayer, asking him to receive our dead ones in his kingdom and heal our bleeding hearts.

We direct that Masses and prayers be offered in all the Churches in the Diocese next Sunday, while awaiting the detailed program for our prayer in this period which will be announced later. As good Christians, we should, like our Lord Jesus Christ, pray for those who persecute and kill us: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). We also pray for those whose responsibility it is to protect and defend us. We are sure that in no distant time we shall also hear the voice of the Lord saying to us: "Stop your weeping dry your eyes. There is hope for your future after all. your children will return to their homeland" (Jer 31:16-17).

Nigeria is a country richly blessed by God with abundant human and natural resources. For decades we have continued to senselessly slaughter ourselves, squander our resources and destroy our environment. We call on all to please stop this madness, so that, as a people, we may realize our full potentials for the benefit of all and to the glory of God.

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(Catholic Bishop of Nsukka)

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