

# In the throes of police killings

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TWENTY-two-year-old Ernest Obi lived with his parents in Lagos though they hail from the South-Eastern part of the country. A very brilliant boy, he had one of the best results in the WASC exam, hence, gaining admission to a first generation university was not a problem. He was in 200 level when his father lost his job. But in spite of this, his father struggled to ensure that he did not drop out of school being a source of joy to the family as the first and only child to have gone that far in the pursuit of education.

But things took a new dimension when Earnest came home during one Christmas break. The reality that stared him in the face was that his family of eight hardly had food to eat. Many times, they resorted to eating mango fruits (the tree grew in their backyard) for lunch and dinner. At this point, he knew that schooling was no longer possible and the family needed to do something urgent so they would not starve to death.

So, when the firm with which his father worked paid his severance allowance and other entitlements, he (Ernest) advised that they should buy a tokunbo car with which he could operate a kabukabu (taxi service) to feed the family. The plan was that he would return to school after he must have helped the family to overcome their terrible financial state.

Earnest was making enough money to feed his family and pay the school fees of his younger siblings when fate played a cruel joke on his family. He was killed at a police checkpoint between Ojota and Maryland for refusing to part with N20. This was in 2008.

In a more recent case of police killings, Sunday, an electronics trader at Idi Arere area of Ibadan, was not involved in the argument that ensued between the driver of the commercial motorcycle conveying him and a police officer when the former refused to pay the "toll fee" of N20, but as it turned out, he paid the ultimate price; he was killed.

The Nigeria Police, expected to be the epitome of courage, honour, courtesy, devotion and dedication to the cause of the citizens and the society at large at all times, have since acquired a new and rather strange attitude- the inclination to cut short the lives of the people they are being paid to protect.

Hardly can a month pass without an incident(s) of accidental discharge recorded somewhere in the country. While the mass media are awash with the incidents of the killing of innocent citizens, several others go unreported.

On many occasions, police kill as a result of the refusal to pay a "toll fee", a bribe or because of other excuses that could best be described as flimsy and outrageous.

Early last year, 2009, Monday Ediaibonye, a commercial cyclist in Benin city, enthusiastically drove a passenger to a bank near Emokpae Primary School hoping to be adequately compensated for the service but,

oblivious to him, death, in a smart, dark uniform, was waiting. Probably, he would have escaped the cold hands of death if he had not chosen to display a little gesture of kindness.

Just as he dropped the passenger in front of the bank, the ball being played by some boys in a nearby school flew past him and hit the gate of the bank. Monday picked the ball and threw it back to the boys prompting the mobile policeman attached to the bank to query his effrontery.

Attempts by the policeman to seize Monday's bike was resisted which made the policeman to shoot him in the head.

Nigerians are besieged by the fear of armed robbers, rising cost of living, fuel scarcity, unemployment and now, the fear of murderous policemen. The fear has subsequently metamorphosed into a deep-seated contempt and hatred for the uniformed men in black.

In Lagos, people reportedly cheered when some robbers got the upper hand in a duel between them and a team of policemen.

This notwithstanding, people say there is much more going on and that what people know about police killings is a mere tip of the iceberg compared to what actually takes place. Those who have been in the precincts of police stations for a while will present a vivid but grimmer picture. People are summarily and deliberately killed in police custody. These witnesses say names are called mostly in the dead of the night and that many times, those called never made it back. Only the police can tell where they were taken to.

These people, they say, could be those awaiting trial or those who were randomly picked and/or raided by the police on flimsy excuses. Some were arrested and detained indefinitely while taking a walk in their neighbourhood or going about their legitimate business.

The 2009 Amnesty International report on extra judicial killings of innocent Nigerians by the police revealed a dastardly act that is heart-rending.

According to the report, which covered three years, from 2007 to 2009, police kill at will and hundreds of people are unlawfully killed by the police in Nigeria every year. It said: "The police don't only kill people by shooting them, they also torture them to death, often while they are in detention... some people die because they fail to pay police officers a bribe...".

Amnesty International, in reference to a Nigeria Police Annual Report, gave the number of robbery suspects unlawfully executed by the force as 3,014 between 2003 and 2008.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission and Nigeria's human rights organisations have said the killings took place under questionable circumstances and that the majority of the cases were not investigated, let alone meting out adequate punishment to the officers involved.

Amnesty International, which observed that some policemen consider the killing of alleged armed robbers in detention as an acceptable practice, reported that its delegate saw 15 people killed in a disused abattoir, and counted at least 30 empty bullet cases, when they visited the Special Anti robbery squad in Abuja in June 2009.

In another report, the Delta State branch of the committee for the Defence of Human Rights said about 120 innocent Nigerians are killed annually nationwide at police check points. And that many times, they are tagged armed robbers.

It gave the example of three artisans, namely: Rotimi Philips, Ibrahim Olojede and Friday Uti, who were reportedly labelled as armed robbers and killed at their mechanic workshop at Alagomeji, Lagos, during a police raid. Incidentally, the brother to one of the deceased was a policeman, and he later disclaimed his colleagues' claim.

Many times, when these killings are reported, they are followed by public outcry and the declaration by police authorities to deal with such killer-cops. End of story.

Indeed, one can say that police killings are particularly a Nigerian phenomenon because such incidents are very rare in other countries. While consenting that it is a Nigerian problem, some Nigerians proffered reasons for this unhealthy development.

Mr. Kayode Ogundoro, a management consultant, stated that the sociology of policing in Nigeria is ultra vires. He said the nation's present day policing is a reflection of the law enforcement agencies of the colonial era, who were used mainly for territorial aggression and to conquer the people physically, before missionaries were brought in to conquer the people's minds (mental and emotional) to ensure the success of their governments.

He pointed out that the police, which derived its name from the Greek word polis, meaning metropolitan or polity, is meant to "police the polity" by enforcing laws, and that with the coming of civilisation, less arms should be used.

While advocating state police, Ogundoro recommended that people in the community should make the police their friend. "The heads like the DPOs and commissioners should be people with tribal affiliations in the areas they oversee. With this, crime tracking becomes easier and the police would be less prone to brutality."

A Nigerian based in the United Kingdom, Dr. Steve Ogbonmwam, however, attributed the situation to the general state of lawlessness and corruption pervading the land. He said: "From the highest office holder who absconds from office without anyone knowing about his whereabouts, to the lowest paid employee, all are lawless. They believe that once they have money, they can buy their way through. In this country, justice is for sale.

He further noted that, in this state of lawlessness and scant regard for the rule of law, there is the tendency for people to arrogate power to themselves, especially when they have certain privileges. Hence, policemen think they have the world in their pockets, being in possession of the AK 47 rifle".

Ogbonmwam added that the situation is made worse by a system that frustrates hardworking people, but rewards mediocrity and indolence.

To Dr. Akeem Akinwale, a sociology lecturer at the University of Ibadan, police killings are indices of the weakness in the law enforcement machinery because, people believe they can always escape or buy their way out when they violate the laws of the land. He said the fact that cases of killings that have been addressed are just a tip of the iceberg, while the delay in bringing culprits to justice have not helped matters.

Mr. Ojo Adebayo, a legal practitioner, had a different opinion. "The situation has persisted because the claim by police authorities to sanction perpetrators of police killings is a mere cover up".

He cited an instance which happened in Ibadan, Oyo state, some years ago, during which a policeman shot and killed two people and wounded three others at a check point. According to him, when the case was filed before the court, the police authorities in the state refused to produce the culprit.

But when the Oyo State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Adisa Bolanta's reaction was sought on this, he said he could not speak on the matter because he was not around then, emphasising that, at the time, issues of police

killings, whether accidental or extra judicial, had reduced immensely all over the country because police authorities ensured that culprits did not go free. He cited a recent happening in Ibadan in which a policeman shot a passenger when, according to him, the motorcycle driver refused to wait when he was ordered to. He said that the policeman had already been dismissed and plans were underway to have him prosecuted.

The Oyo state police boss declared that police killings were illegal. "Policemen are not trained to kill, but to maim, and this depends on certain circumstances", stressing further that, "when a policeman shoots someone, it should be with the intention to maim in order to effect arrest and subsequent prosecution. The situation is such that, even if the judge hands down a death sentence and prescribes the manner by which a criminal should be killed, it is not the duty of the police to kill such a criminal".

However, the fact that police killings have reduced, is totally unacceptable. There's the need for the total elimination of this malady .

There is, therefore, no gainsaying that this, and other issues that have consistently portrayed the Nigeria police in bad light, are pointers to the urgent need for a complete overhaul of the system to purge it of all "infirmities," and thereby give them a human face and human feeling. We cannot continue to hide a leprous finger, for one day, it would infect the others and the whole body bears the brunt.

But while this is being done, Nigeria's political leaders must begin the process of putting the nation on the path of rebirth by eschewing all those vices that are common among them, which are capable of holding the nation to ransom and thwarting all efforts towards the attainment of the desired development. They must live by example.