

Nigeria Police News

22 July 2007.

It took one, two, three and more robbery incidents with the loss of lives and property in Awka, Nnewi and Onitsha before it dawned on the people of Anambra State that they were under the siege of men of the underworld. In fact, between December 2006 and the first quarter of this year, the bandits had raided banks and markets in Nnewi, leaving in their trail, blood, tears and despair. Thus, with the approval of the governor, Mr. Peter Obi, the people have resurrected the dreaded 'Bakkasi Boys' to work in tandem with other security agents against the hoodlums. Obi, on the occasion, charged the outfit now known as Nkwo Nnewi Central Vigilante Unit to work within the confines of the law. Said Obi: "We are committed and we know we cannot do without vigilantes. I thank the people of Nnewi for their initiative. As a government, we support community-based vigilante services so long as their operations are carried out in a civilized manner. "They will have to work with other security agents, especially the police, for the interest of society." Obi told them not to involve themselves in civil matters, adding that their duty is to check the activities of armed robbers and other criminals in the industrial city. The governor said his administration believes in the use of Town Unions for sustainable development of the state. He noted that if Town Unions and Village Heads do their jobs properly, the menace of armed robbery and other violent crimes would be reduced to the barest minimum "because they (robbers) too are from homes." Chairman of Nzuko Ora Nnewi (Nnewi Town Union), Hon Benneth Ngonadi noted that what prompted the community to take the initiative in bringing back 'Bakkasi Boys' is to halt exodus of traders and other residents from the industrial city who had started relocating out of fear for their lives and property. Nnewi community appealed to governor Obi to assist them in the areas of communication gadgets and funding for capacity building of the outfit. It would be recalled that between December 2006 and first quarter of 2007 there have been more than four armed robbery attacks on banks and Nkwo Nnewi market in the metropolis with little or no resistance from security operatives. Each of the operations lasted for hours. In 2000, Nnewi community was the first port of call of the disbanded Bakkasi Boys under ex-governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju administration. Later, it became a state outfit, a creation of the Anambra State House of Assembly. The Federal Government disbanded the outfit after some time, as it was discovered that the organisation had engaged in indiscriminate extra-judicial killings, thus deviating from the purpose of its creation. But the leader of the new-look Bakkasi Boys in Nnewi, Chief Ethel Ihieri, has pledged obedience to the law. He said that his boys are recruited with the consent of Igwes (traditional rulers) of their various communities to ensure that they are not people of questionable characters. As for armed robbers and other criminals, Ihieri declared that they would have no hiding place in Nnewi anymore. Said he: "We have been handling this kind of job. We want to make sure that Nnewi is rid of hoodlums so that everybody will go about his business and sleep in the night with two eyes closed. Our team is equal to the task." As if waiting for the sound of the whistle, signaling the commencement of their peculiar kind of policing, the group, shortly after inauguration, stormed the town with four brand new pick-up vans and a Mitsubishi L 300 bus, dressed in black with their no-nonsense paraphernalia against criminals. It was their own way of announcing their arrival on the stage, obviously to warn criminals to relocate. But in a swift reaction, Chairman of the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Anambra State chapter,

Comrade Emeka Umeagbalasi argued that setting up or inauguration of armed vigilantes may not be a panacea to rising tide of violent crimes in any society. Lack of skill, he said, has proven to be their bane. He expressed the fear that “members of such vigilance groups are peopled by urchins, drug addicts, drunkards and undesirable elements. A highly corrupt and incompetent police cannot effectively monitor their activities. So, despite the dos and don’ts given to them, they will surely go astray and gaga.”

The CLO boss said Governor Obi must be very careful “otherwise he may end up like former Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju. He said that the governor should retain what he described as 2006 security pattern by requesting from Inspector General of Police, Mr. Mike Okiro, for the posting of some “competent, less corrupt and loyal police big shots in the state loyal to him.”

Umeagbalasi said failure to do that, even if Governor Obi sets up vigilantes in all parts of the state, “the ugly scenario would remain.”