



Criminal intent

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Despite repeated outbursts of outrage by an oppressed populace, killers in police uniform have continued to waste innocent Nigerian lives. The slaying recently of a nursing mother in Alimoso, a sprawling Lagos suburb, by a police team engaged in extortion should challenge the federal administration, which rode to power on the promise to deliver change, to action. Will President Muhammadu Buhari's government also allow senseless killings of civilians by policemen to continue on his watch?

Established by the constitution to protect lives and property and enforce laws, some renegade policemen have often turned the force into an instrument of oppression. Extortion, perversion of justice, illegal arrests and detentions and false accusations are their favoured tactics. Sadly, they sometimes add murder to their nefarious activities and the body count is mounting.

The Alimoso case bears all the telltale signs of police atrocities. An eight-man team of policemen from the Isheri Osun Police Division on Wednesday September 16 set up a checkpoint on Ijegun Road, in direct defiance of a directive by the Inspector-General of Police, Solomon Arase, to dismantle checkpoints. Their sole mission: to extort money from commercial tricycle and motorcycle operators. Godwin Ekpo was also riding home in his tricycle with his wife, Idongesit, and children, one of them a toddler, when they passed by Obalagbe Bus Stop where the policemen were busy collecting tolls from their tricycle victims. One cop, angered that Godwin did not stop to pay a toll, shot at them. The bullet killed Idongesit, who was breastfeeding a three-month-old baby, instantly and also hit Godwin who however lived to tell the story.

The scene is depressingly familiar. Unlike in developed countries where records are kept, there are no accurate official figures of all persons killed extra-judicially by the police. But many cases have been reported over the years, with innocent lives wasted and only very few of the villains and their complicit or careless bosses ever brought to justice. The impunity was evident recently in Akure, the Ondo State capital, where policemen, claiming to be hunting illegal drug users, invaded the home of 50-year-old Ronke Adelugba and beat her to death, again in the presence of her children. The failure of the police leadership to enforce discipline in the force and end the entrenched culture of extortion is often the proximate trigger for police brutality. Like the Alimoso eight, the seven-man police team in Akure was on its usual routine of indiscriminately arresting youths on trumped-up charges to facilitate extorting bail ransoms of between N5,000 and N10,000 per victim.

The response of the police leadership has ranged from instinctive denials of the atrocities of their men to secretive “orderly room trials” of a few, redeployment of complicit senior officers, deliberately poor investigation of reported slayings, blatant lies against the victims and unfulfilled promises of tough action against the perpetrators. When journalists, Godwin Agbroko and Abayomi Ogundeji of This Day, were separately slain in their cars, police unconvincingly blamed armed robbers. The Apo Six murders of five men and a lady in 2005 by policemen was followed up with shoddy investigation, mysterious escapes of prime suspects and planting of arms on the victims to falsely present them as armed robbers.

A 2008 report by Amnesty International lamented that because police perpetrators of hundreds of unlawful killings every year go unpunished and families of the victims “get no justice or redress,” rogue Nigerian policemen continue to kill.

Buhari needs to take radical action to stop what Human Rights Watch labels “a shocking common occurrence” in Nigeria. An NGO, Network on Police Reform in Nigeria, which has researched into extrajudicial police killings in Nigeria for many years, says the practice is prevalent in every part of the country. While police excesses are sometimes reported worldwide, Nigeria is distinguished by its failure to take hard action against perpetrators. In the United States where police have killed 470 persons this year, the culprits are swiftly suspended and if found culpable of unlawful killing, prosecuted in the courts and careless superiors punished. NORPRIN researchers found that police are prone to using excessive force in effecting arrests, leading to grievous injury or death of their victims. Cato Institute, a US think tank, linked aggression by policemen to low morale and indiscipline.

In Nigeria, the main challenge for Buhari and the IG is enforcing discipline in the force. Nigerians confront this phenomenal indiscipline everyday on the roads, at checkpoints and at police stations, where unlike other paramilitary forces, respect by the rank and file for authority wears rather thin to the point that lowly cops routinely defy even the IG’s orders as evident in the hundreds of illegal checkpoints across the country despite his well-publicised order forbidding them. Drunkenness while on duty and armed is rampant.

Arase should make examples of all those involved in the latest cases. Dismissing and prosecuting the lone shooter will not suffice: hard examples must be made of other members of the killer-squads and their superior officers back at station for lack of proper supervision. The IG and the police high command should weed out notoriously corrupt police officers. Never again should the life of any citizen be so cavalierly wasted without the full weight of the law being brought swiftly and heavily on trigger-happy cops and crooked officers.