Deplorable federal road turns Delta community into kidnap hotspot

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Once the food hub of Delta State, Abavo community in Ika South Local Government Area is fast losing its agrarian identity as farmers abandon their farmlands due to persistent kidnappings, killings, and destruction of crops by marauding gunmen, writes MATTHEW OCHEI  
  
For the past four years, residents of the Abavo community in Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State have continued to look to the heavens, asking where their help would come from as killings and kidnappings persist.  
  
In the past two years alone, an estimated 86 persons have been kidnapped, with about 30 never returning home alive.  
  
. The most recent incident involved suspected herdsmen who abducted a female farmer and shot three members of the local vigilante group.  
  
The victims were part of a vigilante outfit established to protect farmers in the Oyoko area of Abavo after repeated attacks by herdsmen.  
  
The abducted woman and her husband had been working on their farm when the herdsmen struck. While the man managed to escape, his wife was not so lucky.  
  
Last year, the community wrote a Save Our Soul letter to the governor, titled, “Abavo community faces existential threats arising from incessant kidnappings, killings and destruction of farmlands in the kingdom.” The community in the letter signed by Mr Frank Jeghefume and Mr Jude Amamosa, who are President and Secretary General of Awu Elites club, called on Governor Sheriff Oborevwori to “rescue them from their enemies.”  
  
The letter lamented that incidents of kidnapping for ransom had escalated to dangerous dimensions, whereby some of the victims had lost their lives. “The criminals release few of their victims only after huge sums of money, sometimes running into millions of naira, have been paid; some of the victims are being raped and farmlands are being destroyed,” the letter read.  
  
The residents identified hotspots of the attacks as the Abavo farmlands close to the Warri-Itakpe railway line running through Abavo, Azuowa Quarters, as well as the road linking Owa kingdom in Ika North East Local Council to Abavo.  
  
Abavo is one of the kingdoms in the Ika South Local Council of Delta State. It is largely an agrarian community and home to the famous Oyoko Market, regarded as one of the biggest food markets in Delta State. Every four days, buyers from within and outside the state troop there to purchase foodstuffs.  
  
However, the spate of insecurity has forced many farmers to abandon their farmlands. The market is no longer booming, while the once-busy Agbor-Amukpe Road is now deserted, with only motorcycles and bicycles plying it.  
  
When our correspondent visited the Agbor-Amukpe road, they observed that vehicles had deserted the road not only because of the deplorable state of the road but also due to the fear of the unknown. People were seen plying the road largely using motorcycles and bicycles.  
  
While awaiting the government’s attention, the community have taken steps, including assisting the security agencies, setting up local vigilantes, among others. But the siege by criminals on farmlands and farmers has never ceased sustainably. But residents lament that the vigilante has been overwhelmed by the ferocity of the attacks.  
  
Abavo also lies along the long stretch of the Uromi-Amukpe Highway, constructed over 50 years ago. Community leaders believe the deplorable state of the Agbor-Amukpe section of the road has made them vulnerable to attacks.  
  
Paramount ruler of the community, His Royal Majesty, Uche Irenuma, led the call on the Federal Government to fix the abandoned Agbor-Amukpe road to not only ameliorate the sufferings of the community but also address its security challenges. Taking the bull by the horns, the monarch, on August 22, led the community dwellers on a march on the poor road to register their grievances. As a matter of urgency, Irenuma appealed to President Bola Tinubu and Governor Sheriff Oborevwori to come to the aid of the community “before hoodlums eliminate all residents of the community.” The monarch, who was represented by his Chief of Staff, Odigie Yusuf, lamented that farming, which the community is renowned for, is going extinct owing to the kidnapping aid by the bad road.  
  
Irenuma said, “Abavo community is tagged the food basket of the nation, but we are saddened by the deplorable condition of the road linking Agbor to Amukpe. Abavo is an agrarian community. We can’t market the food we produce due to the bad roads. People are suffering as farming is our only occupation. We want to use this opportunity to appeal to Governor Sheriff Oborevwori to, as a matter of urgency, fix this road. We know this is a federal road, but the state government’s intervention has become crucial. Abavo is suffering. We appeal to the Federal Government, State Government and the Local Government to come to our aid.”  
  
Going down memory lane, the President General of the community, Mr. Justine Onyeibe, stressed that, for decades, Abavo, on the Uromi-Amukpe Road, has been an economic hub in the heart of Delta State but has been “held back by crippling road infrastructure.”  
  
Onyeibe stressed, “Abavo lands are fertile. We are blessed by nature to have some of the most bountiful harvests in the region. Our people are hardworking, innovative, and resilient, but we’re limited by this horrible road. This is a project that is far more than just asphalt and concrete; we are here talking about a lifeline, an economic corridor, and the key to paving the path to prosperity for the beloved communities in the Abavo kingdom. For decades, Abavo, on the Uromi-Amukpe Road, has been an economic hub in the heart of Delta State. Yet, for all our blessings, we have been held back by one critical, crippling constraint: inadequate road infrastructure.”  
  
He recalled the joy that pervaded the community when the contract for the dualisation of the Uromi-Amukpe Road was awarded in two sections, but noted that the wait for completion of the project is now 10 years old. He pointed to the profound impact of good roads on the economic development of the Abavo people.  
  
Onyeibe added, “The Agbor-Amukpe section that Abavo is situated on was awarded to Messrs CCECC, while the Uromi-Agbor section was awarded to Messrs Setraco. Awarded in 2014, the contractors were mobilised between 2015 and 2016 to commence work.  
  
“But 10 years later, this road has been a barrier, rather than a bridge to transformation. The state of this road is not just an inconvenience; it is the single greatest enabler of criminal activity in our region. The terrible, potholed, single-lane stretches, often reduced to a muddy track during rains, are a kidnapper’s perfect hunting ground.  
  
“It forces traffic to slow to a crawl, making vehicles sitting ducks for ambush. It creates isolated, deserted stretches where criminals can operate for hours without fear of interruption or security patrols. This abandoned project has inadvertently designed a security nightmare. Every crater-filled stretch is a potential trap. Every overgrown bush, allowed to thrive because construction halted, provides cover for men with guns and evil intentions.”  
  
Onyeibe stressed that many families had fallen victim to attacks, noting that only the completion of the road would curb the scourge of kidnappings.  
  
“I stand before you today on behalf of the terrified commuters, the grieving families, and the besieged communities along the Amukpe-Abraka-Abavo-Agbor road. Our message to the Federal Government is simple and clear. Eliminate the scourge of kidnapping on this highway by completing its dualisation. The dualisation of this road is nothing short of a revolution for Abavo, and its impact will be felt most profoundly in critical areas of Agriculture, Commerce and Industry.  
  
“The story of perishable dreams: yams, cassava, plantain, leafy vegetables, tomatoes, peppers, and many other agricultural produce that rot in heaps by the roadside; unable to reach distant markets before they spoil, will disappear. This new, modern highway will be the artery that pumps life into our agricultural sector. This means more food on tables across regions and more money in the pockets of our farmers”  
  
The community lamented that the high costs of transporting yams, cassava, plantains, and palm produce are so high that they eat into the meagre profits of the hardworking farmers, describing the situation as stunted commerce. Onyeibe noted that the situation has also deterred large-scale agro-investors who can get access to land but dread the road. As a result, he noted that some investors have shunned the area.  
  
“With a smoother, faster, and more reliable connection to major markets in Warri, Benin, Asaba, Calabar, Lagos, Kano, Benin Republic, Cameroon Republic and beyond, our perishable goods will travel in hours, not days. A dual carriageway signals stability and accessibility; it will attract agri-businesses, processing plants for our cassava into garri, flour and starch, yams into flour, packaging facilities for our vegetables, and factories for our palm produce.”  
  
With increased investors in the community, he noted that the youths will have more employment opportunities. “With value addition and entrepreneurship, our youth will no longer see agriculture as a sign of poverty, but as a field of opportunity. They will venture into food processing, logistics, export, and digital marketing of Abavo’s produce to a wider world. This road is a powerful tool for youth engagement and poverty alleviation.  
  
“This will create jobs here, in Abavo, moving us from being mere producers of raw materials to creators of finished goods. Easier access will mean cheaper and quicker availability of farm inputs like fertilisers, seedlings, and equipment. This will empower our farmers to increase their yield and improve their practices, knowing that getting their produce to market is no longer a gamble,” he added.  
  
He also highlighted the wider benefits of the road. Onyeibe stressed, “The benefits extend far beyond the farms. The Agbor-Amukpe road will catalyse a complete economic awakening for Abavo Town. Imagine tourists and visitors from neighbouring states easily driving in to experience Abavo’s famous Festivals, including the New Yam Festival, Igue and Ikaba Festivals and to buy directly from their farms. Beyond economics, the road means quicker access to healthcare facilities in the cities for emergencies. It means children can travel to universities and return home more safely as it connects to the University of Delta, Agbor.”  
  
It was also lamentations on the “deplorable and impassable” road at a most recent stakeholders’ meeting. They lamented attendant poverty, unemployment, and dwindling patronage of the once-thriving food market. They also lamented the untold hardship to community members and general road users. They also acknowledged that the road served as an alibi for kidnapping and robbery to flourish. This is because they decried the consequence of a near-zero patronage at the once popular food market.  
  
Reading a communiqué after the meeting, Prof. Alex Naiho stressed that the abandoned road promoted poverty and unemployment in the community, as well as huge economic losses due to the inability of farmers to evacuate their produce to consumers and marketers. “On behalf of the good people of Abavo Kingdom, our message and request to the Federal Government (and also to Delta State Government), is simple and clear: We use this opportunity to appeal to the good conscience of the Federal government of Nigeria to direct the beneficiary company of the Chinese Civil Engineering and Construction Company to, as a matter of urgency, provide palliative measures to restore the usability of the road.”  
  
Naiho added, “We also appeal to the Federal government of Nigeria to further direct and perhaps re-mobilise the beneficiary company (Chinese Civil Engineering and Construction Company) to return to site and expedite action on the main substance of the contract, which is dualisation of the road, that while commending the security agencies for their efforts in combating crime, especially killing and kidnapping, we request that they do more to sustain peace in full cooperation with citizens of the kingdom.”  
  
However, the Federal Controller of Works, Delta State, Mr Matthew Ogar, for an update on the road, said that works are ongoing from the Sapele end of the road. He appealed for patience. He said, “Work is ongoing on that road, but it’s two sections: section one and section two. Section one is under Delta State, that is, Agbor-Abraka up to Sapele; section two is from Uromi junction to Ewu to Edo State, and Edo is in charge of that, and they have started working from the Edo end. While the other section they are working on the Sapele end. It’s a complete project; they have worked from Sapele to Eku. We appeal for calm. He also disclosed that the Delta State Government recently approved N59bn for the construction of a flyover at Uromi junction in Agbor, although residents insist it would be a waste if the Agbor-Amukpe road is not fixed.