

Murder Incorporated

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By Okey Ndibe

The Nigerian police have long had a reputation for needless highhandedness and unjustified bloodlust. So embedded is this fearsome reputation in the popular imagination that Nigerians have taken to describing mobile police officers as “kill-and-go.” The picture is of officers quick to draw their guns, take aim at (usually) innocent citizens, and let out a deadly report. Nigerians know that the fear of the police is the beginning – and often the end – of wisdom.

Inspector General Mike Okiro recently reminded us why the police are feared. Two weeks ago (November 14), Mr. Okiro disclosed that, in a mere three-month span between June and the end of September, the police shot and killed 785 suspected armed robbers. In the same period, the police arrested 1,628 suspected armed robbers.

Okiro’s disclosure was nothing short of a scandal. It implied that the police under his command had become a mindless and unrestrained killing machine. Okiro is less an inspector general than the commander of a human slaughtering enterprise. He presides over a business whose corporate name might as well be: Murder Incorporated.

Okiro’s startling statistic was released with gusto. There’s no question that the IG expected to be garlanded and feted for doing a superb job. Instead, Nigerians ought to recoil in horror and outrage at

the man’s gruesome conception of his job. A police force that specializes in extra-judicial killing of Nigerians deserves jeers, not cheers.

What’s worse, Okiro made the chest-thumping revelation while briefing the House of Representatives’ Police Affairs Committee on the “achievements” of his first three months in office. Why didn’t the legislators tell him there and then that he and his subordinates were out of line?

Okiro’s notion of crime fighting has produced no verifiable deterrent effect. His announcement has brought Nigeria nothing but international embarrassment. A Sierra Leonean friend rang me from Tampa, Florida to express shock. He was in Jamaica attending a conference when Okiro’s gleeful statistic was disseminated through agency reports.

Instantly, he told me, it became the talk of the conference. People gathered in groups to discuss this bizarre factoid of Nigerian law enforcement. Most were incredulous. Did they hear right? What manner of country? What would be the fall-out? Would the IG survive this public confession that the men and women under his command had become trigger-happy dealers of death?

Human Rights Watch, which less than two months ago released a scathing report on the April polls, weighed in by calling for an official probe. In a

statement titled "Nigeria: Investigate Widespread Killings by Police," HRW called on Abuja to "launch an independent public inquiry."

Gory as Okiro's portrait was, Human Rights Watch actually suggested that the reality could be more sordid. It speculated that "the true number of people killed by the police since 2000 may exceed 10,000." Peter Takirambudde, the agency's Africa director, said "It's stunning that the police killed half as many 'armed robbery suspects' as they managed to arrest during Okiro's first 90 days." Then he added: "And it's scandalous that leading police officials seem to regard the routine killing of Nigerian citizens—criminal suspects or not—as a point of pride."

Okiro's confession served to bring out to the open a dastardly practice that has been a poorly kept secret. Nigerians know that the police operate according to an unwritten rule, namely, that armed robbery suspects are taken to the back of police stations and executed. The victims of such unsanctioned executions are, in the official lingo, "wasted."

The Human Rights Watch has a dossier on such blatant miscarriages of justice. The international body noted: "Police officers routinely label individuals they kill as 'armed robbers' who fired on police; according to police statistics, all of the thousands of individuals shot and killed by police officers were 'armed robbers.'... In June 2005, the murder of six young people at a police checkpoint in Abuja generated a nationwide scandal that led to an investigation and criminal charges against the officers involved, but that case was an exception to prevailing norms. Reported cases of investigations

into police killings have been extremely rare and accountability even less common.

"In August 2006, police arrested and publicly 'paraded' 12 armed robbery suspects in the Abia State town of Umuahia; the 12 were later found among a pile of 16 corpses deposited near a local mortuary. Police officials claimed that all 16 were armed robbers who had somehow been involved in an exchange of gunfire with the police. No investigation was carried out."

My guess is that this reprehensible practice thrives because of the popular (and founded) perception that armed robbery has risen to an implacable scourge: incessant, pervasive and nightmarish. Many armed robbers operate with a viciousness that inspires terror in the hearts and heads of their victims. I've been a victim of armed robbery in a Lagos cab; it is not an experience to wish on one's worst enemy. Some robbers are not content to strip their victims of hard-earned possessions and valuables; they also gut their victims of dignity and leave them dispirited. Some of them relish to rape, maim and kill. They scar their victims in body and spirit.

In fact, the Human Rights Watch underscored the depth of the problem. It acknowledged that "Many parts of Nigeria experience extremely high levels of violent crime, owing partly to rising poverty, high unemployment and the proliferation of small arms throughout the country." Then it revealed that "Dozens of Nigerian police officers die in the line of duty every year."

Given robbers' cruel modus operandi, it is no surprise that the society has come to think of them as less than human. Armed robbers, so the argument goes, merit summary treatment. And that includes, especially, summary capital treatment.

Hard as it is, it is an argument—and an attitude—that a society that aspires to enlightenment and realization of humane values must reject. To start with, we must never forget that the casualties of police execution are not armed robbers. They are “armed robbery suspects.”

The difference is critical. No state should ever dabble in the business of willfully killing innocent citizens. Yet, even when the paraphernalia of justice is sound and the process for determining guilt or innocence rigorous, it is not uncommon for an innocent or two to fall victim to human error or malice. When the issue of divining guilt or innocence is left to the whims and caprice of inept, corrupt and ill-equipped police officers, then the margin of error is liable to be multiplied by several factors.

Even if all police officers were morally exemplary and meticulous in the discharge of their duties, it still should not be up to them to decide whom to execute, when and how. Citizens should always be wary of a law enforcement agency that seeks the powers to mete out death or grant absolution. A corrupt police—and the Nigerian police is widely regarded as a synecdoche of corruption—should not be entrusted with determining when a suspect is guilty—and deserving of execution.

Impatience with the grinding pace and circuitous mode of the judicial system is one reason many otherwise informed

citizens are swayed by the seductive illogic of instantaneous “justice” via police execution. But it behooves us to realize that it is all of us, not just the 600 odd “suspects” slaughtered by Okiro's men, whose humanity is discounted. In conceding to the police the fiat to kill in our name once the victim is tagged an “armed robbery suspect,” we expose many innocents as well as ourselves to the same hazards. All we need do to fall victim is be in the wrong place at a time the police are out to “prove” that they are up to combating the scourge of armed robbery.

Attorney General Michael Aondoakaa bestirs with the mantra of “rule of law” when it comes to legal jeopardy for former and serving public officials accused of betraying the public trust. But when more than ten prisoners died at Ibadan Prison, he did not see fit to visit the facility to inspect its inhumane conditions and to champion the rights of its hapless occupants.

Nor has Mr. Aondoakaa got round to rebuking Okiro and the police for extra-judicial slaughter of impoverished Nigerians. That's deplorable. A state that turns a blind eye to the killing of thousands of its citizens risks encouraging citizens to adopt self-help rather than the vaunted rule of law. Human Rights Watch has collated Nigerian police records on its unilateral executions. Said HRW: “by the police's own statistics, police personnel have shot and killed more than 8,000 people since January 2000 in circumstances that remain largely unexplained. In 2005, police officials told Human Rights Watch that from January 2000 to March 2004 police personnel killed 7,198 ‘armed robbers’ in ‘combat.’ Remarkably, during

the first three months of 2004, the police claimed to have killed 422 armed robbers in shootouts, while recovering only 300 firearms.”

This is chilling statistics by any measure, and an indictment of the police. It is time the police tried a different, and professionally sounder and accountable, approach to crime prevention and fighting. Instead of persisting with a suspect policy of mowing down “suspects,” it is time the police embarked on internal house cleaning. It should then devise a rigorous method for gathering intelligence on true crime suspects and update its manual for solving crimes.

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

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