

TENSIONS SIMMER AFTER ILE-IFE ETHNIC CLASHES IN NIGERIA

ILE-IFE, Nigeria: For his whole life, Hausa trader Bashiru Tanko has lived peacefully alongside the Yoruba people of Ile-Ife in southwest Nigeria. Originally from the northern city of Kano, Tanko's father settled in the Sabo area of the city, where he built a prosperous family business. "I was born and bred in this town. Even though my parents came from Kano, I have not known any other place I can call home," 41-year-old Tanko said.

"We have always settled our differences. We have lived together without acrimony for ages. We marry ourselves and do business together." But last month an altercation between a Yoruba woman and a Hausa trader triggered a bloody conflict that left 46 people dead, around 100 injured and houses razed to the ground, according to the police. "I was shocked that what began as a minor dispute was allowed to snowball into an unprecedented carnage," Tanko said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Locals say that upwards of 200 people—the majority Hausas—lost their lives in the violence. "An accurate number is difficult to get, because most people don't go to hospital when they are injured, or they bury the deceased themselves," said Gbemisola Animasawun, a researcher at the Center for Peace and Strategic Studies in Ile-Ife. "But I can confirm that most killed were Hausas. They were killed inside their homes," Animasawun said. "It's still very tense out there."

Tanko's family house was not spared in the mayhem. As he walked through the streets of ruined buildings, Tanko stopped at a roofless bungalow blackened by smoke and littered with damaged household items. "That heap of rubble used to be my father's house," Tanko said. "I, my wife and our four children, now squat with a relation whose house was not touched," he said.

Unprecedented carnage

Hadi Ali, a local 48-year-old tailor,



NIGERIA: A picture taken shows people sitting beside lock up shops burnt following clashes between Hausa community and ethnic Yoruba people of Ile-Ife in southwest Nigeria.—AFP

said criminals capitalized on the violence, seizing the opportunity to loot houses and shops. "What happened was a small matter between a Yoruba woman and a Hausa trader which was immediately settled," Ali said. "The following morning, the woman's husband, who happened to be a leader in the garage (bus station) went and mobilized his boys and they started killing our people, looting our properties and burning our homes," he said.

"We are still bombarded with reports of missing people. Those killed were our people," he said. Ali said Hausas have fled the town, but would be happy to return if the crisis is resolved. "Our people are leaving because they no longer have anywhere to stay. They are afraid of being attacked again," he said. Ile-Ife's leaders claim that there is no cause for alarm, with prominent politician Bashiru Awotorebo declaring that Yorubas are ready for peace.

Meanwhile, traditional ruler Ooni Adeyeye Ogunwusi has set up a panel to

reconcile the two sides and "prevent a recurrence of this unfortunate incident," said Ooni's deputy Idowu Adediwura. But more needs to be done to assuage fears that the Hausa community remains a threat to Ile-Ife, and in the aftermath of the violence, there has been divisive rhetoric from political leaders. Olajire Awowoyin of Ife Progressive Forum recently blamed an influx of foreigners from Chad and Niger for the unrest.

He also accused the police of being "one-sided and unfair" after arresting only Yoruba suspects. Yinka Odumakin of the Afenifere Yoruba socio-cultural group too has campaigned in favor of the "unconditional release of the suspects to avoid igniting ethnic tensions."

Yet experts say that the root cause of the issue has less to do with ethnicity than with Nigeria's economic recession. "It's the trend all over the world that economic problems lead to social and ethnic tensions," said University of Lagos history lecturer Dapo Thomas.—AFP

PAKISTANI STUDENT ACCUSED OF BLASPHEMY BEATEN TO DEATH ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

PESHAWAR: A mob beat a Pakistani student to death at his university campus yesterday after he was accused of sharing blasphemous content on social media, university and police officials said. A group of about 10 students shouted "Allahu Akbar" during the attack on fellow student Mashal Khan, who was stripped naked and beaten with planks until his skull caved in as other students looked on, video obtained by Reuters showed.

Blasphemy is a highly sensitive topic in Muslim-majority Pakistan, where insulting the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) is a capital crime that has hundreds languishing on death row and where even an accusation can lead to violence. In recent months, Pakistan's government has been vocal about the issue, with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif issuing an order last month for removal of blasphemous content online and saying anyone who posted

such content should face "strict punishment under the law".

Ten students have been arrested after Thursday's attack on the grounds of a university in the northern city of Mardan, local police chief Mohammad Alam Shinwari said. "After severe torture that led his death, the charged students then wanted to burn his body," said Shinwari. At least 65 people have been murdered over blasphemy allegations since 1990, according to figures from a Center for Research and Security Studies report and local media.

It was unclear exactly what online posting had prompted the blasphemy accusation against Khan, who was studying journalism. One of Khan's teachers recalled that he was a passionate and critical student. "He was brilliant? and inquisitive, always complaining about the political system of the country, but I never heard him saying anything controversial against the reli-

gion," said the teacher. In 2011, a bodyguard assassinated Punjab provincial governor Salman Taseer after the governor called for reforming blasphemy laws. Taseer's killer, executed last year, has been hailed by religious hard-liners as a martyr to Islam and a shrine has been erected at his grave. Recently, fighting blasphemy has also become a rallying cry for the government. Pakistani online activists believe blasphemy-related crack downs on social media are veiled attempts by the country's powerful military to limit dissent on human rights violations.

In January, five online activists went missing and were publicly accused of blasphemy while they were absent. Four of them have reappeared and at least one has said he was abducted and interrogated by Pakistan's intelligence agencies. The military has denied any part in the activists' disappearances.—Reuters

SYRIA'S ASSAD SAYS CHEMICAL ATTACK 100% FABRICATION

DAMASCUS: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said a suspected chemical weapons attack was a "fabrication" to justify a US military strike, as Moscow digs in to defend its ally despite increasing strains with Washington. In an exclusive interview with AFP in Damascus—his first since the alleged April 4 attack prompted a US air strike on Syrian forces—Assad said his army had given up all its chemical weapons and that Syrian military power was not affected by the US strike.

"Definitely, 100 percent for us, its fabrication," he said in the interview on Wednesday in reference to the alleged chemical weapons attack. "Our impression is that the West, mainly the United States, is hand-in-glove with the terrorists. They fabricated the whole story in order to have a pretext for the attack." Western leaders including US President Donald Trump have accused Assad of being behind last week's attack in the rebel-held town Khan Sheikhun, saying his forces unleashed a chemical weapon during an air strike.

The suspected attack killed at least 87 people, including many children, and images of the dead and of suffering victims provoked global outrage. Syria denied any use of chemical weapons and Moscow said the deaths had been the result of a conventional strike hitting a rebel arms depot containing "toxic substances."

Fake videos

In the interview, Assad insisted it was "not clear" whether an attack on Khan Sheikhun had even happened. "You have a lot of fake videos now," he said. "We don't know whether those dead children were killed in Khan Sheikhun. Were they dead at all?" He insisted several times that his forces had turned over all chemical weapons stockpiles in 2013, under a deal brokered by Russia to avoid threatened US military action.

"There was no order to make any attack, we don't have any chemical weapons, we gave up our arsenal a few years ago," Assad said. He said his forces had not been diminished by the US strike. "Our firepower, our ability to attack the terrorists hasn't been affected by this strike." Denouncing a "very barbaric" attack, Trump ordered a strike that saw 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles slam into the airbase in central Syria from where Washington accused Assad's forces of launching the attack.

Trump bats aside criticism

It was the first direct US military action against Assad's forces since the start of Syria's civil war six years ago and led to a quick downward spiral in ties between Washington and Moscow. Russia accused the United States of breaking international law with the strike against the Syrian regime, a key ally that Moscow has supported with air strikes since 2015. Trump gave such criticism short shrift on Wednesday, saying: "I felt we had to do something about it. I have absolutely no doubt we did the right thing."

Standing alongside NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington, Trump also said it was "certainly possible" that Russia was aware of the suspected attack. "I would like to think that they didn't know, but certainly they could have. They were there. So we'll find out," he said. The strains in ties were clear as US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson received a frosty reception Wednesday on a visit to Moscow.—AFP



DAMASCUS: This file photo shows Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during an interview with AFP in Damascus.—AFP