

Lagos *The Punch* January 29, 2004

Senan John Murray, "Interpol trails Yobe Taliban leader to Saudi"

The Nigeria Police may have enlisted the assistance of the International Police Organisation, Interpol, in order to track down the leader of the Taliban militant Islamic sect, believed to be behind the recent spate of violence in parts of Yobe State.

Security sources told our correspondent that the spiritual leader of the group, Abu Umar, fled to Saudi Arabia, a development that necessitated the involvement of Interpol in the manhunt for him.

"We got to know that the man who is believed to be behind the group has gone to Saudi Arabia," the Assistant Inspector General of Police in charge of Zone 17, Mr. Fatai Fagbemi, told our correspondent on the phone from Bauchi.

Fagbemi added, "We have two stories about how he moved to Saudi Arabia.

"One version claims that he went to Saudi Arabia to perform the lesser Hajj for last year and fell ill and had to stay back for medical attention.

"The other version claims that he fled to Saudi Arabia in the heat of the group's armed confrontation with soldiers who attacked their camp in Kanamma (Yunusari Local Government Area of Yobe)."

The AIG also disclosed that the Nigerian authorities had constituted a joint investigation team comprising men of the State Security Service, Nigeria Army and Police to get to the root of the Yobe uprising.

Fagbemi who insisted that the police could not say whether or not the Yobe Taliban, also known as Sunna Wal Jamma had foreign sponsors, however, confirmed that its membership included children of wealthy and influential Nigerians.

"We discovered that they were children of influential Nigerians and most of their parents are based in Maiduguri.

"We went and talked to some of these parents and they admitted that yes indeed their children were among the group and they also told us that their children were mature and enlightened enough to take decisions for which they are also responsible," the police boss added.

He, however, declined to mention the names of the affected parents, saying that "if I disclose their names, they would be embarrassed and that will not be good."

The police chief said that most of the arms so far recovered from the group were service rifles and hand guns used by the Police.

He noted that the arms were mainly those stolen from police armouries in Kanamma and Geidam police divisions during the weeklong reign of violence by the militant Islamic sect.

Fagbemi, who insisted that the situation at the northern fringes of Yobe was now calm, added that, "all the villagers who fled to Niger and other places have all returned to their homes.

"Commerce has once again picked up in the area and people are going about their normal businesses without hindrances," he said.

He stated that the arrested members of the group would be charged to court as soon as the investigations were over.

The Yobe Taliban mounted a violent uprising in parts of Yobe, including the state capital, Damaturu with the aim of instituting what it called true Shariah in the 17 northern states.