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# RESOURCE-BASED CONFLICTS: THE EREI FARM SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE, 1961-2025

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**ABSTRACT**
This study examines the deep-seated resource-based conflict rocking the Erei Farm Settlement. This farm straddles the communities of Okon Aku in Abia State, Ekoli Edda in Ebonyi State and Ikun, Urugbam and Egbor in Cross River State. Despite the glimmer of hope from the value of land, farm's wealth and rising stock in palm oil, conflict has continued to ravage these pristine communities and their economies. To resolve these paradoxical gaps, the study aims at establishing a straight course on the history, causes and solutions to water down this conflict. In doing this, the study adopts qualitative method of in-depth analysis by relying on primary and secondary sources, while using structural conflict theory to expand the existing knowledge of the conflict. The findings reveal that varying claims to and unequal distribution of a piece of land with a total area of 10,385.30 acres and its resources were the underlying causes of the conflict. The study concludes by addressing this smothering conflict and recommends the governments of Abia, Cross River and Ebonyi States to develop a comprehensive strategy for natural resources regulations to meet and overcome the conflict.

**Keywords**: Erei Farm Settlement, natural resources, conflict, land, boundary

## Introduction

Resource-based conflicts are a well-known phenomenon in Nigeria. A number of these conflicts have erupted over natural resources on a particular group's land. The factors responsible for these conflicts are sometimes slippery to pin down in natural and human components because of their overlapping and the complex role of man in them. Under the factors of resource-based conflicts, the most obvious characteristics are that they are induced by oil deposit, farmland, spatial inequality, population explosion, human greed and territorial influence, like in the Erei Farm Settlement. The conflict in Erei Farm Settlement specifically centres within and the surrounding neighbourhood of the Eastern Region Estate Investment (EREI) (Eastern Nigeria Gazette 531). The general survey plan of the farm covers the five communities of Okon Aku of Ohafia Local Government in Abia State, Urugbam, Egbor and Ikun of Biase Local Government in Cross River State and Ekoli Edda of Afikpo South Local Government Area in Ebonyi State. Based on reappraisal of the triangular location of the farm, these five communities were directly involved in the conflict because they occupy adjacent farmland adjudged to be the boundary. Distinguishably, this farm was established in 1961 by the defunct Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC) as the largest farm in Eastern Region of Nigeria. It occupies an area of 10,385.30 acres, equivalent to 4,202.786 hectares (Eastern Nigeria Gazette 531). But in the midst of this expansive farm with great potential, it became a paradox of poverty, underdevelopment, unhealthy rivalry, unrest and sporadic social violence.

The causes of this conflict are seen from the prism of being complex. But some notable reasons have been identified. These reasons are the struggle for landownership and exclusion of Ekoli Edda in the compensation of the land acquired by the Government of Eastern Nigeria in 1962. This was coupled with annexation and re-annexation of the farm to Cross River State in 1976 and 1996. This whittled down cohesion, leading to the consensus collapse and subsequent abandonment of the farm. This apparently gave way for communities around the palm plantation to start scrambling for control over the land and its resources. The impact of this conflict led to great catastrophic upheavals leading to the loss of lives and property; demographic destruction and the sacking of Urugbam and Afono from their ancestral home. Using issue analysis identification, this study will exhaustively give in-depth examination of the history, causes and provide solution for future policy formulation for the resolution of the triangular conflict.

## Objectives

The objectives of this study are to;

i. trace the history of the triangular conflict between Ikun, Egbor, Urugbam, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda;
ii. examine the causes of the conflict;
iii. provide recommendations that will help address the conflict between Ikun, Egbor, Urugbam, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda.

## Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative method of in-depth analysis which involves measurable numbers and quantifiable units for proper understanding and application. This method was used to reconstruct the history of the conflict in Erei Farm Settlement from the inside-out perspective. On one hand, primary sources like letters, memorandum, archival materials and oral interviews were used. Four (4) in-depth oral interviews were conducted with key informants. Accordingly, the four informants were carefully selected to cover the core reasons for the conflict. Information gleaned from oral interviews were based on self-reports. Self-report is a process where informants are asked how they feel, think or are inclined to act in a given situation and their responses are

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taken, recorded and tallied. While painstakingly noting this, oral interviews were strictly guided by high research ethics of voluntary participation, anonymity and respect. On the other hand, secondary sources gave explanatory judgements from published and unpublished works.

**Study Area**

Urugbam and Egbor are the two Erei communities in the conflict that lie on the northwest of Biase, locked between the majestic Cross River, Ikun, Ohafia and Ekoli Edda. These two communities were formally known as Enna (Egwu 3). According to reliable records in onomastic, the name "Enna" was changed to Erei on November 6, 1961 at Crown Counsel Customary Court Division (Igube 1) to cover Urugbam, Egbor, Abanwan, Ipene, Ibini, Edu, Umolor, Afono, Obum and Etana. In another public notice of the Customary Court of Law, 1956, the Eastern Region Law No. 21 of 1962 made a warrant for change of name from Enna to Erei at the Enna/Unwana District Court Grade "A" to Erei/Unwana District Court Grade "A" (Ebonyi Position Paper 39). Ikun is one of the Ubaghara communities located on the northwestern fringes of Biase (Egwu 3). The Igbo-speaking community of Ekoli Edda is in Afikpo South beside the Cross River. Their ancestry is traced to a central figure called Ugwu. Afikpo was partly founded by the Ekoi people from the present-day Cross River State and a branch of Igbo (Obono-Obla, Oral Interview: 23/10/2025). Okon Aku is in Ohafia beside the boundary with Cross River State.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is rooted in the structural conflict theory, which draws its inspiration from the groundbreaking work conducted by Johan Galtung in 1969. The theory highlights the role of institutionalized inequality such as political and economic exclusion, poverty, injustice, exploitation of resources, etc. as the motivating factors that explain the emergence of conflict (Galtung 171). In furtherance of this, the theory maintains that conflict is a part of the unjust and flawed nature of human society. For instance, when a group perceives that it has consistently been disadvantaged by the system of the state, it resorts to violence to express its demands or grievances. This is the exact paradigm of the triangular conflict between Egbor, Urugbam, Ikun, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda where the governments of Abia, Cross River and Ebonyi have not effectively addressed these disparities and exclusions. The theory systematically sways its emphasis on violent competition that is directly tied to Egbor, Urugbam, Ikun, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda's social, political, economic and institutional organizations; and the nature and strength of the social networks between and within them.

Fittingly, the theory has provided a unique perspective on how conflict is built and recognizes that conflict occurs because of the way societies are structured and organized. However, the structural conflict theory has been criticized for its feeble attempt to dislodge the fluid basis of human actions which focuses its interest in natural resources.

**Natural Resources and Conflict**

This study reviews literature on the role of natural resources in fueling violent conflicts and underdevelopment. Long-standing and multifaceted causes have made it difficult to isolate one single driver from natural resources and conflict. Despite the lack of clear-cut consensus on the direct link between resources and conflict, Maphosa averred that the struggle over access to and control is a considerable ground for tension and conflict (2). Again, increased resource competition has emerged as one of the key drivers of conflict. From 1995, the frequency of violence in Erei Farm Settlement has considerably increased thereby becoming a major impediment to leveraging on the farm's resources for sustainable and equitable development. Furthermore, discourses have shown that natural resources play a key role in triggering and sustaining conflicts. Mitch Sodaro and Morden Olson have disciplined the symmetrical

relationship between natural resources and conflict. The authors agreed that resources that create these problems, sometimes, are embedded in the narrative of social and economic grievances. Being under a curse, the resources have hurt the prospect of peace and development by feeding rebellion and violent conflict.

In sharp agreement with the above, communities with natural resources often have stunted rates of economic development as exemplified by Erei Farm Settlement. This is because the profit derived from expropriation of resources tend to make conflict rise. These profits empower the community and its rivals leading to repressive and destructive activities of armed militias from the windfalls of the resources that may hamper economic development of the people. Sodaro opined that natural resources are a source of political contention because such resources are capable of igniting intense conflict (34). In addition to this, evidence reveals that people whose wealth is dependent on agricultural produce and natural resources are largely prone to conflict. This is the behavioural paradigm with the Erei Farm Settlement where the outcome of the game between natural resources and conflict across rivals, most times, work to foment conflict. This has been corroborated by Morden Olson who reiterated that the presence of natural resources often cause ebbing economic development and long-standing grievance that lead to violence (24). Furthermore, the role of natural resources in fueling conflict is ingrained by understanding the deep anger against lack of government presence and educational opportunities. This is why the relationship between resources and conflict is complex. These resources interact with numerous economic, socio-cultural and political factors that create exclusion and inequality.

The concept of land as a natural resource is usufructuary in Egbor, Urugbam, Ikun, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda where it belongs to the living, unborn and dead members of the community. Drawn from this, the land becomes the most significant factor for generating this conflict. Evidence has also shown that this farm provides members of these communities with power and prestige, security, employment, and wealth. That is why this farm with these economic and strategic characteristics is an important source of conflict, as adversaries would prefer not to negotiate for settlement. Rather, the control over such farm may greatly increase the gaining side's chance for successful attack or defence in a future occurrence and may make both sides reluctant to allow the peaceful transfer of such farm to an adversary. The transfer of any part of this treasured and strategic farm will definitely alter the contending parties' bargaining positions, because the farm lies in the heart of identity, power and cohesion. The existence and autonomy of the farm tend to be seen as important historical connection with a particular people whose territory in question is a scene of events for economic, socio-political and strategic activities.

In the case of Erei Farm Settlement, there are four most important conditions that have influenced how access to resources is contested. First, scarcity of a natural resource, which is the extent to which the supply, is shared by the groups. Second, the relative power quotient of the groups which is the degree of dependence on a particular resource (land) or the ease of access to alternative sources (water) for survival. Third, the wider inequalities and structural cleavages, whether real or perceived, lead to rivalry or conflict over the use or control of such natural resources. Fourth, that politically marginalized groups may compete for the chance to gain or secure rights, while privileged groups may feel the need to defend their existing rights. Sometimes, less privileged groups may compete to seek more influence. In this situation, struggling for resource access becomes linked with the struggle for recognition, sense of identity, status and political rights (Sodaro 3).

However, many groups have different uses for resources like forests, water, pastures and land, and want to manage them in different ways. Knowing about these different needs can help

to inform government and policy-makers of successful management strategies for these resources so that everyone or group can benefit at any given time. For instance, Ekoli Edda favoured the use of the land for subsistence farming while Egbor is interested in commercial farming. Such differences can lead to conflict when there is competition over land. Here, parties believe that their needs would be unmet and may be under significant threat or danger. Moreover, natural resources are increasingly becoming a subject of intense competition. In most cases, several factors have been responsible for their scarcity. They include demographic change in terms of population growth, migration and urbanization; market pressures of such resources increase commercialization, intensification and privatization of the local economies while the growing integration of national and global economies, economic reforms and environmental changes force people to alter their livelihood strategies. All these forces can push people to exceed the sustainable harvesting limits of renewable natural resources of the forests, water bodies, grazing areas, marine resources, wildlife and agricultural land. In areas where there is population growth, resources often need to be shared among more users with different interests. These users range from farmers seeking access to agricultural land, pastoralists requiring pasture resources for livestock, fishermen seeking access to rivers, and city dwellers requiring more meat, palm oil, fish and cereals. Securing access to these resources can become people's greatest concern when those resources are scarce. Water scarcity in arid or semi-arid regions is a key example. As resource-based conflict is in the upward tweak in Erei Farm Settlement, it is becoming a more pressing issue. Vying for the control of this farm has fueled a vicious cycle, which has had detrimental impact on development among the contending parties of Egbor, Urugbam, Ikun, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda.

**A History of the Triangular Conflict in Erei Farm Settlement**

Several attempts at explaining the origin of the conflict in Erei Farm Settlement have remained inconclusive and incredibly challenging. But it is safer to agree that the conflict started in 1961 with 360 settlers, when the farm was established (NIFOR 2) by the defunct Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation (ENDC) under the premiership of Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara. This farm was previously located in Afikpo Division with the name of the site as Eastern Region Estate Investment (EREI). The farm starts at a concrete pillar marked by PBG 4932, the coordinates of which 810.93 feet are south and 263.62 feet are west of a concrete pillar marked ECS IT, which is the origin of Erei Cadastral Survey. These boundaries run in straight course of bearings and lengths. According to the Eastern Nigeria Gazette, the Erei Farm Settlement has three pieces of land at Erei containing areas approximately 5,390, 295.3 and 4,700 acres as respectively shown on Plans Nos. AFC 68 and 69 (tracing Nos. E. 2720 and E. 2809) (531). These pieces of land were purposefully set aside for the establishment of the Erei Farm Settlement.

Indeed, the triangular historical impasse in the farm dates back to an existing judgement of the Customary Court of Eastern Region of Nigeria at the Erei/Unwana District Court Grade “A.” The case was held at Erei District Court with Suit No. 30/61 on November 4, 1962, in the Afikpo Division between Onete Osim, a representative of Egbor landowners of Erei Farm Settlement (Plaintiffs) and Nkama Ugbor and other representatives of Ugwuelu in Ekoli Edda as landowners of Erei Farm Settlement (Defendants). This judgement was given in good faith in favour of Egbor, but Ugwuelu in Ekoli Edda claimed that this judgement was on default and not on merit of the cause because of their exclusion.

However, during when the land was acquired, compensation was calculated at the rate of 4/- per acre (40k per acre) and a total compensation of ₦23,292.34 was paid up to March 1970 (NIFOR 2). Using the proportional representation of acreages of land contributed by each donor community, the ENDC in 1965 distributed the compensation as follows that Egbor was paid

2,045.8 acres for the northern portion of Erei Farm Settlement. Ikun was paid 4,429.2 acres for the southern portion of Erei Farm Settlement while Urugbam and Okon Aku were jointly paid a compensation for 3,910.3 acres, being the central portion of the Erei Farm Settlement. In fact, the compensation was paid into an "especial court account" pending the determination of the two consolidated Suits Nos. E/44/62 and E/17/62 at the High Court Enugu on the actual area of land donated by Urugbam and Okon Aku each (Ada 27). As a result of this revelation, Egbor owns the 2,045.8 acres of the northern portion while Ikun owns 4,429.2 acres of southern portion; whereas the 3,910.3 acres of central portion is in dispute between Urugbam and Okon Aku (Egeh, Oral Interview: 24/01/2026). That the distribution principle for Erei Farm Settlement (i.e. 4,429.2 and 3,910.3 acres for Cross River and Abia States respectively) has been accepted pending the resolution of the disputed triangular piece of land between AC13, AB13 and CR12 (Ada 27).

Based on records of compensation paid by ENDC for economic trees and ground rents to the landlords/donor communities of the farm settlement, the following communities were compensated and documented as recipients: Ikun, Urugbam, Egbor, all of Cross River State and Okon Aku of Abia State. Ekoli Edda was never mentioned in this compensation payment. But at the end of the unfortunate civil war in 1970 and creation of new states in Eastern Nigeria, series of glaring misunderstanding arose among the communities bordering the farm settlement. These border communities started to claim allegiance to different states of old Imo, Cross River and later Abia and Ebonyi. This period balkanized the once united farm settlement into Abia, Cross River and Ebonyi States which watered down the social cohesion among the landlords/donor communities. In order to prevent further breakdown of law and order, the Federal Government of Nigeria decided to take possession of the farm settlement. After the takeover, the Nigerian Institute for Oil Palm Research (NIFOR) was mandated to manage the farm settlement in 1977, on behalf of the Federal Department of Agriculture (FDA). For this reason, a high-powered committee was set up with members drawn from NIFOR and FDA; and saddled with the responsibility of serving as an 'Advisory Department Committee'. This committee functioned as the apex decision-making body that formulated policies for the smooth running of the farm. NIFOR's assignments in the project included amongst other things, to provide neutral presence among the warring communities and keep peace in the disputed boundary areas between Cross River and Imo States. The committee later approved the change of name for the scheme from Erei Farm Settlement to Federal Government Oil Palm Project in 1977.

In about 1992, NIFOR leased the palm plantation to Sam-Grace Ltd to manage on its behalf. This company later became complacent, leading to abandonment and completely pulling out of the palm plantation. In a crowded canvas of history, the people of Okon Aku were the first to agitate against the continued existence of the farm settlement (John 1), after citing the insufficiently compensated and wrongful expropriation of the central portion of the Erei Farm Settlement. The portion of this farm was occupied and exploited by settlers who totally treated the land as belonging to the Cross River State authorities (Agwu, Oral Interview: 09/01/2025). Okon Aku also sacked the settlers who were working for Ikun and repossessed a part of the farm settlement. The Urugbam Accord observed that this resulted into a bloody inter-communal conflict arising from the removal of the boundary pillars between Ikun and Okon Aku in 1995 and 1997 leading to the loss of lives and property (The Urugbam Accord 1). In the binding accord, Okon Aku, Abanwan, Urugbam, Ugwuelu and Egbor participated fully in the cessation of hostilities on August 5, 1999. Through The Urugbam Accord of August 14, 1999, the Willis Ubi Committee ceased its operations and the NIFOR Palm Plantation was exploited together by Ikun, Urugbam, Egbor, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda on Tuesdays of every month (Ebonyi Position Paper 33).

Meanwhile, during the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) Meeting on Cross River/Abia Interstate Boundary held in Umuahia on June 12, 2001, the National Boundary Commission (NBC) presented to both states a sharing formula which gave the 4,429.2 acres of the southern portion to Cross River State and gave the entire 3,910.3 acres of the central portion to Abia State. The NBC's sharing formula was accepted and signed by leaders of the delegation of both states (Ada 23). The leader of Cross River State delegation to the JCC Meeting was Nuella Rabana Andem-Ewa, the Commissioner for Justice and Attorney-General. Specifically, paragraph 7, sub-paragraph 7.2 of the Communiqué of JCC Meeting on Cross River/Abia Interstate Boundary spelt out the sharing formula as follows that, "…pending the resolution of the disputed triangular piece of land between AC13, AB13 and CR12 by the governors of the two states" (Ada 28), Orji Uzor Kalu and Donald Duke. But from June 12, 2001 to date, no successive governors of both states has been able to decide the fate of this triangular land bordered by points AC13, AB13 and CR12.

The despaired Urugbam was intensely restless about this signing off model. In fact, it was observed that, in a petition to the Cross River State House of Assembly, the aggrieved Biase delegates roundly condemned and rejected the action of Nuella Rabana for signing off the entire central portion of 3,910.3 acres of the Erei Farm Settlement to Abia State. This practically left Urugbam disenfranchised and empty-handed (Ada 28). After series of diligent and exhaustive considerations of Urugbam's petition, the Cross River House of Assembly passed a resolution officially jettisoning the NBC's proposed sharing formula in that sector. The reasons deduced were that the judgement obtained by Okon Aku was only for a portion of and not the whole of 3,910.3 acres of the central portion of the Erei Farm Settlement. Egeh Ukam asserted that it was, therefore, wrong and unjustifiable for the NBC to hand over the entire 3,910.3 acres of the central portion to Okon Aku of Abia State (Oral Interview: 24/01/2025). Also, that the entire stretch of the western boundary of the Erei Farm Settlement forms a part of the Decree Boundary Line between Abia and Cross River States as contained in the Boundary Description Line of Schedule 2, Part C of Decree 23 of 1985. Flowing from this, ceding the entire central portion of the Erei Farm Settlement to Okon Aku of Abia State amounts to altering or distorting the Decree Boundary Line in that sector (Ada 28) and calling for a mortal combat. Furthermore, Cross River State has argued that the enabling law establishing the NBC does not empower it to alter or void Federal Government Decree/Laws unilaterally and arbitrarily. Therefore, the NBC proposed sharing formula under consideration amounts to using extra-judicial powers to repeal Decree 23 of 1985 as it affects the Cross River/Abia Interstate Boundary Line and by extension, Cross River/Ebonyi Interstate Boundary Line (Ada 28). During the wrangling of the JCC Meeting on Cross River/Abia Interstate Boundary held in Calabar on November 7, 2003, Cross River State had vigorously canvassed for the NBC to revoke the sharing formula previously signed by both states on June 12, 2001. This was firmly established by Cross River State that the sharing formula was a miscarriage.

**Scramble for Northern Portion of the Farm Settlement**

But Ekoli Edda had continued to groan on the compulsory acquisition of a part of the land without compensation by the defunct Eastern Region of Nigeria, NIFOR and the Federal Government Oil Palm Project. This further deteriorated the relations when the Erei Farm Settlement was changed to Erei Oil Palm Estate by Government of Cross River State in 1998 leading to the omission of Ekoli Edda by Management Committee on Landlords' Communities of Erei Oil Palm Estate. Before this, the management of NIFOR, in a communiqué, had made available to Ekoli Edda, eight (8) blocks (Block 21, 22, 26, 27, 31, 32, 36, and 37) of the farm settlement which amounts to 480 acres of land out of the project's land for subsistence farming (Ebonyi Position Paper 32). In contrast to this, Cross River State is of the strong opinion that the

land title for the 2,045.8 acres of the northern portion of the Erei Farm Settlement belongs to Egbor for the following irreducible reasons. Firstly, in 1965, the ENDC exclusively paid the sum of £1,412:2:2 to Egbor Erei Welfare Union on behalf of themselves and Egbor Erei as compensation for unexhausted titles, economic trees and ground rents to the landlords/donors communities of the farm settlement (Ada 28). Secondly, the same record showed that Ekoli Edda was never mentioned as one of the landlords/donor communities of the farm settlement; neither did Ekoli Edda make any protest challenging the action of ENDC as per payment of compensation to Egbor and to other landlords/donor communities of the farm settlement. Thirdly, Egbor has valid Court Judgement to back up their land title claim to the 2,045.8 acres of the northern portion of the Erei Farm Settlement (Igbor, Oral Interview: 08/11/2025).

It is noteworthy that the Communiqué of JCC Meeting on Cross River/Abia State Boundary held in Umuahia on June 12, 2001, referred to the above, specifically did not mention the 2,045.8 acres of the northern portion of the Erei Farm Settlement. Neither did the communiqué assign title for it to Egbor nor Ekoli Edda. An extant document with Class Mark 1/1/547 on Erei Farm Settlement with File No. 199/III, from the Eastern Region Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, showed the acquired Erei Farm Settlement, the total land area, payment and payments made before the Nigerian Civil War and where certificate of title was incompletely issued (Ebonyi Position Paper 32). Despite this, Ekoli Edda that shares boundary with Biase was never compensated. As claimed by Ekoli Edda, this invariably means that government never had any valid title over the land. According to Ebonyi Position Paper, government's reason was that, it was problematic to pay compensation because Erei Farm Settlement is located in an area where part of its falls within the South-Eastern State and a part of the East-Central State (33). This has made it impossible for the title to be obtained until the delimitation of state boundaries. Ebonyi State strongly argued that the 1968 Eastern Region Map of Nigeria should be used to trace and demarcate the East Central and South-Eastern States now Cross River/Ebonyi Interstate Boundary Line at Afikpo South/Biase Sector of the both states' boundary (Ebonyi Position Paper 33).

**Causes of the Conflict**

Fishbone method of analysis was used to examine the causes of the conflict in Erei Farm Settlement. The causes are examined below.

Interstate boundary adjustment was the root cause of the conflict. During the establishment of the farm settlement in 1961, the farm was formally located in Afikpo Division of the Eastern Region (Official Gazette 6). But the Justice Mamman Nasir Boundary Adjustment Commission annexed Erei of former Imo State to Cross River State due to historical and linguistic origins. Moreover, the Federal Military Government's acceptance of the recommendations of the Justice Irikefe Report and agreement to take over the farm translated the farm into the conflict. Furthermore, the Justice Mbanefo Commission on Creation of States, New Local Government Areas and Boundary Adjustment in 1996 led to the neglect of the farm settlement (Egwu 6). Also, key actors like Emperor E. Egwu, the President of Erei Welfare Union, Oji Ogbonnaya and Okereke Ukam from Erei were found to be setting great unrest among the Erei people against their neighbours through boundary politics because of personal interest. This led to a partial nonpayment of rent to the landlord communities by the government (Egeh, Oral Interview: 24/11/2025).

Another reason for the conflict was the scramble for the oil palm farm. The dynamic scramble for control of the farm settlement was exacerbated by the involvement of Urugbam, Egbor, Ikun, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda immediately after the Civil War in 1970. In their quest to protect this incompatible interest led to the indiscriminate erection of unauthorized buildings in

the farm by settlers who regarded the farm as a 'no man's land' (Oku et al 2). This led to wrong expropriation and exploitation of the farm without the consent of the landlord communities. This scramble unfolded the violence leading to the atrocities and displacement of villagers. Besides, the conflict was linked to Buhari's economic reform of 2015 and 2023 that placed deep emphasis on agriculture. This scramble acted as one of the drivers of the conflict because of armed gangs. There is no doubt that security and safety of the people declined as land donors could no longer access the farm because armed gangs from Cross River, Ebonyi and Abia States were terrorizing and exploiting the farm settlement unchallenged.

Leasing of the northern portion of the farm in April 2018 for 20 years by Egbor was another significant reason for the conflict. The northern portion of the farm was leased by Egbor to Chief Felix Ezeamama of the African Stone Works Company Nig. Ltd for ₦20,000,000 without the consent of Urugbam and Ekoli Edda (Egeh, Oral Interview: 24/11/2025). This development was not palatable to Urugbam who had assumed co-ownership of the northern portion of the farm. Egeh Ukam expatiated that Egbor also alienated Ekoli Edda on the joint ownership of the farm (Oral Interview: 24/11/2025). This dispute between these three groups was minimal until violence unfolded and erupted on June 12, 2018, during a joint harvest in the farm settlement following the killing of Mmecha Ibe of Ekoli Edda by Egbor (Egeh, Oral Interview: 24/11/2025).

Duplication of roles by government was another reason for the conflict. The overlapped decisions of the government and its agencies by signing a communiqué and constitution of panel of enquiry created a cycle of confusion over authority, sparking up quick violence between Erei communities and Ekoli Edda. For instance, conflicting directives from the October 13, 2018 communiqué in Abuja, prolong the conflict. This communiqué was signed by the deputy governors of Cross River and Ebonyi States, Ivara Esu and Kelechi Igwe declaring the triangular ownership of the farm between Egbor, Urugbam, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda. Also, the communiqué made for joint harvesting of palm fruits from the plantation to be based on local arrangements. In the same vein, while investigations on the causes and impact assessment of the conflict by the Judicial Panel of Enquiry headed by Justice Eyo Effiong Ita were going on, the communiqué ignored the Panel that would have aided the resolution of the conflict (Egeh, Oral Interview: 24/11/2025). This action provoked backlash, turning the fragile peace into violence between Egbor, Urugbam and Ekoli Edda.

The creation of alliances within the farm settlement escalated the conflict. The alliances were initially made for deterrents' purposes to discourage attacks and guarantee that if two communities go to war, their allied partners would also be dragged in. These alliances were seen during the outbreak of December 4, 2018 conflict where the dispute between Egbor and Urugbam quickly pulled in Afono, Abanwan, Ibini and Ipene. Furthermore, these alliances created a domino effect that bred preemptive aggression among the rival communities, thereby creating preemptive violent strikes. For instance, the creation of alliance between Urugbam and Ekoli Edda led to counter-alliances for protection between Egbor and Abanwan. This was one of the reasons the conflict was initiated by Ekoli Edda to break the Erei alliance apart before their coalition to own the 65% of the farm settlement becomes too strong to defeat (Egeh, Oral Interview: 24/11/2025). Also, other surrounding communities took sides as Abanwan instigated Okon Aku into conflict with Urugbam. This contributed to ignite a chain of violent reactions among Erei communities and between Ekoli Edda. Finally, the strained relations between Ipene and Urugbam led to road block by Afono while the blunt refusal of Ipene to allow Urugbam passage through Ipene marked another crisis in the farm settlement. Also, Abanwan had picked a quarrel with Urugbam for Ipene not to lift the blockade. This followed the refusal of Abanwan to support Urugbam's rightful claim to the

land. All in all, the conflict in Erei Farm Settlement was a catastrophic humanitarian disaster that led to an estimated deaths of 168 people and over 15,376 displaced people (Igbor, Oral Interview: 08/11/2025).

**Conclusion**

The study has deeply looked into the origin of the conflict in Erei Farm Settlement. It was found that the objects of the conflict were landownership and inequitable distribution of resources between Erei, Ikun, Okon Aku and Ekoli Edda communities. Since the Erei Farm Settlement was the main driver of the violent conflict, this farm needs to be treated as a crucial dimension to the prevention of the conflict through sustainable development and peace-building. Having identified the enormous problems and consequences of the conflict, it is recommended that the governments of Abia, Cross River and Ebonyi should improve upon natural resources governance and address the ownership and control of the land for conflict prevention and peaceful coexistence among the warring communities.

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