

Overloading caused boat accident that killed my 13-year-old ward – Bizwoman

January 25, 2026 1:14 am



Mrs Rachael Gugu, guardian of Mchivir Aondowase, a teenage student who lost her life in a late-night boat accident on the Buruku River in Benue State. | Credit: Ayoola Olasupo.

By Ayoola Olasupo

Mrs Rachael Gugu, guardian of Mchivir Aondowase, a teenage student who lost her life in a late-night boat accident on the Buruku River in Benue State on her way back to school, tells AYoola OLASUPO about the agonising hours of uncertainty, desperate search for the child she raised as her own, and the deep grief that has left the family devastated.

What is your relationship with the late Mchivir?

I got married to her uncle, Emmanuel Kubwa, and we have four children. It was last year that my sister-in-law, who is my husband's immediate younger sister, brought her daughter, Mchivir Aondowase, to our house so that she could attend Government Secondary School, which is very close to our house in Gboko, Benue State.

How old are you, and what is your occupation?

I will be 39 years old in March. I am a businesswoman. I sell shoes.

How did you hear about the boat accident?

On Saturday, January 17, 2026, Mchivir's parents called us to say that she would be coming back, and I told them that I would be at home waiting for her. They called back again to say that there were some other children who were coming back as well, so Mchivir would have to join them that same week for them to come back together.

While they were on the way, Mchivir's parents called to say that she had started the journey. After a while, I didn't see her. So, I called her father, and he said he would call me when she reached her destination.

Around 1.45 am, we received a call from a strange number that, while she was coming back, the boat she boarded capsized. But the distance from Gboko to the Buruku River is very far. It's not a place one can just decide to go overnight.

We waited and couldn't sleep till daybreak. So, at 5 am, we took off. When we got to the river, we saw many people there. There were some children who were also removed from the river. A woman was directing us and was explaining what happened to us.

What did she say happened?

She said the boat accident occurred around 10 pm, and her daughter was also involved. However, she was brought out alive, and I think it was that woman or her husband, they gave our number to call us.

We saw where the boat had capsized. When we asked them what happened, they told us they were crossing the river between 9 pm and 10 pm.

We were told that on that Sunday, there were many passengers trying to cross the river, and many children were returning to school. So, the number of passengers who boarded the boat was too high. The driver survived the boat accident.

Did you see the corpse of your ward when you got to the accident scene?

When we got there, we couldn't see our daughter, Mchivir. She drowned in the river, and we had to look for her. Six children died in the incident, and people (divers and sympathisers) were looking for them.

Mchivir wore her complete sportswear, so it was later that they called us that there was a man who cast a fish net at the other side of the river, and that one student hung on that net as the river was flowing down.

People went there, and they discovered that it was Mchivir's remains that hung on the net. Then they brought her remains to us. This happened on January 18. Her body was handed over to us by 10 am on January 19.

That means she was in the water throughout the night. The bodies of all six children who died in the river were recovered the next day.

How many passengers were on the boat?

I can't really tell the number because I was traumatised, and I couldn't ask many questions. But the boat carried two vehicles, passengers, and many other things.

We saw some of the loads after they were removed from the river and put on the shore. I learnt that Mchivir was inside one of the vehicles, and there were 13 children inside it. Out of those children, seven of them survived.

Did you take her to the hospital after she was found?

No. As we removed the body from the water, we took her home straight. We called her father, and we told him that we wanted to deposit her body at the mortuary, but he said we should bring her home.

By the time she was taken home, her body was already decaying. So, she was buried at 6am the next day. The incident happened on Sunday; we recovered her body on Monday, carried her to the village, and buried her on Tuesday.

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Can you describe where the boat accident happened?

The boat accident happened on the Buruku River in Benue State.

How is the family coping with the ugly incident?

It has not been easy for us all, especially Mchivir's parents. As we speak, her mother is still experiencing trauma, and even her father has lost some of his senses. He couldn't reason properly anymore, and that is why he couldn't speak with you.

That incident has affected his life because it really touched him. Mchivir was their first child, and she would have been 14 years old this year.

How many children do her parents have?

They were four altogether: two boys and two girls.

As Mchivir's guardian, what are some of the memories you can never forget about her?

She wasn't a stubborn child. I don't know what to say because she was a very good girl. I'm not saying this because she's dead. She was a very respectful child at home.

She was even the one who told her mother that she wanted to come and meet us, and her mother allowed her. Mchivir was my husband's niece, and she was always with us. She used to run errands for us without showing tiredness.

Were there any cultural or burial rites the family observed because of the nature of her death before she was buried?

She was a Catholic communicant, so it was the reverend father who was in charge that came to bury her. There was nothing like any cultural or spiritual rites. She was buried in a Christian way.

Has the family been able to get any further information about what caused the accident?

Nothing has been heard since then. Since we recovered her from the river, we took her away from the spot just to bury her. There's nothing like an investigation from the family side unless officials are doing that, but we would not want that.

You were the first person to hear about the incident. How did her parents receive the information?

It wasn't easy because they were looking up to us. They couldn't travel from their place to the scene of the boat accident because of the traumatising situation and the distance, so my husband and I went to follow up with the incident, and we were communicating on the phone.

They were even asking us if she was still alive, and we said yes because we didn't want to cause more tension or more deaths at home before the arrival of the child's corpse. When they asked us if they could see her alive, we just said we were still looking for her, even when we knew she was already dead.

Immediately her body was brought out of the river, we took off and left the place. We knew she had drowned for some hours and might start decomposing soon.

It was when we got to her parents' compound that they knew she was dead. We learnt that the driver of the boat died.

I think they were able to survive because they were grown-up people, and they were able to find their way out of the river after the boat capsized.

Do you think those who died could have survived if the accident happened in the daytime?

The children could not swim, and the accident happened in the middle of the night. They could have even called for help if it were during the day. Of course, we were also preparing to sleep at that time. Till now, the driver has not said anything about what caused the accident.

All we knew was that it could be because of the overloading. Another thing is that a bridge was being constructed on the river, so a part of it was blocked, and the water was channelled to pass through one

side.

I think that was why the tide was so high for the boat. Buruku is a very big river, not a stream, so I think the water diversion made the tide heavy. That could be the possible reason the boat capsized, given that it was also overloaded.