

Lagos plaza death toll hits five as fire razes another market

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| By Dayo Oyewo

The death toll from the fire that gutted the Great Nigeria Building in the Balogun Market area of Lagos Island, Lagos State, has risen to five, as two more bodies were recovered from the rubble on Sunday.

This came as another fire outbreak on Monday evening gutted a section of the Arena Market in the Bolade area of Oshodi, Lagos State.

The Lagos State Fire and Rescue Service, in a statement by its Controller General, Margret Adeseye, stated that it received a distress call at about 5:50pm, prompting the immediate deployment of firefighting units, which arrived at the scene within five minutes.

She added that the fire affected five 40-foot container shops arranged in two rows, bringing the total number of affected shops to 10.

The statement read, “The Lagos State Fire and Rescue Service received a distress call at approximately 17:50 hours today reporting a fire outbreak at Arena Market, Bolade, Oshodi.

Firefighting units were promptly dispatched and arrived at the scene within five minutes. At about 17:55 hours, fire crews from Bolade, Ilupeju, Ikeja, and Alausa Fire Stations responded swiftly and collaboratively to contain the incident.

“The fire affected a section of the market consisting of five (5) 40-foot container shops arranged in two rows, making a total of 10 shops. The affected area is primarily used for the storage and sale of clothing materials, which were stocked in bales. The fire has been confined to the affected section and curtailed. The situation is firmly under control, and there is no risk of the fire spreading to other parts of the market.”

According to the fire service, the inferno was successfully confined to the affected section and brought under control, with no risk of it spreading to adjoining areas of the market.

On the GNI incident, PUNCH Metro reported that the fire started on the fourth floor and spread to the sixth floor of the 25-storey building before engulfing the remaining floors and adjoining structures.

A detached section of the plaza, estimated at about seven floors, collapsed during the inferno, trapping traders and market assistants.

While seven individuals were rescued shortly after the collapse, three bodies were recovered from the rubble on Friday.

Sources at the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency told *PUNCH Metro* on Tuesday that the additional bodies were pulled out during ongoing search-and-rescue operations on Sunday.

“We recovered two more bodies on Sunday. The bodies were already burnt because of the fire, and we could not recognise who they were. One of the bodies was also mangled.

“The goods under the rubble are still a reason why the fire is still burning under it. It is no longer an emergency situation other than recovery,” the source disclosed.

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Our correspondent gathered on Tuesday that more people have begun to throng the scene of the incident in search of their loved ones.

There were also indications that the customers who had come to purchase goods were also caught up in the incident.

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“More people have been coming to this place since Sunday in search of their loved ones who had come to purchase items in the market. They claimed they last heard from them on Wednesday when the incident happened,” a shop owner in the market, Wunmi Olabisi, told *PUNCH Metro*.

Emergency responders have continued excavation and search efforts amid growing anxiety from families awaiting information on missing relatives.

PUNCH Metro had earlier reported that no fewer than 20 individuals were still trapped under the rubble.

Relatives who spoke to our correspondent in separate interviews on Sunday also provided names and photographs of their affected loved ones.

The identified victims include Elo Chukwu, Omeigbo Chuwuebuka, Omeigbo Chukwudubem, Kayode Omoniyi, Ikechukwudi Asobi and Murphy Aborinwa.

Others are Onyeka Obinwa, Mercy Ukamaka, and Taofeeq Opera, as well as a trader identified as Chiding and two of his boys.

The remaining trapped persons include several other market assistants whose identities could not be ascertained.

Reacting to the incident, the Shitta-Bey family of Lagos, owners of the GNI Building, expressed deep sorrow over the fire incident that recently gutted the high-rise structure, describing it as a tragic occurrence.

In a statement made available to PUNCH Metro on Tuesday, the family said its thoughts and prayers were with the victims and their families affected by the incident.

The family assured the public that it was working closely with relevant authorities to ensure that affected individuals received the necessary support and assistance.

“The Shitta-Bey family of Lagos, the owner of Shitta-Bey Court, popularly called GNI Building, is deeply saddened by the recent fire accident in our high-rise building.

“Our hearts go out to the victims and their families affected by this tragic incident. We want to assure the public and residents that the family is working closely with authorities to ensure that affected individuals receive all necessary support and assistance.

“We urge everyone to disregard any false narratives or misinformation being spread by the former tenant/caretaker, Great Nigeria Insurance Ltd (GNI), under whose management the building got burnt in November 2013 but was left in a dangerous state for almost six years until the family, pursuant to the Order of the High Court of Lagos State dated the 31st day of October, 2019, recovered possession from the company and rehabilitated the building.”

The family further reassured residents and stakeholders that the building was adequately insured and pledged its commitment to restoring the structure, including the mosque with