

Six Benue students feared killed in boat accident

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| By John Charles

No fewer than six students returning to school were reported to have lost their lives in the Buruku River in the Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State.

PUNCH Metro learnt that the incident happened when the boat they were sailing on capsized Monday night.

A local source told journalists on Tuesday that the wooden boat was heavily loaded with passengers, which might lead to the capsizing.

One of the eyewitnesses, a maritime worker who was at the scene but pleaded not to be named, said the passengers had delayed their movement to allow politicians returning from a church thanksgiving service in Logo to be ferried first.

He added that they tried to stop passengers from boarding for the governor and his entourage to pass first, a reason he said made the students cross in the night.

He said, “Nightfall caught up with the remaining passengers, and the boat eventually departed with a large number of people onboard.

“Midway into the journey, the boat capsized due to overloading. Most of the passengers were rescued, but six students drowned. Five bodies have been recovered so far, while search efforts are ongoing for one missing victim,” he said.

Another witness, who corroborated the account, blamed the mishap on gross overloading, noting that the boat was carrying over 45 passengers alongside vehicles.

A relative of one of the victims, Pastor Jethro Moor, said the deceased were students from Gbeji in the Ukum Local Government Area who were travelling back to Gboko for school.

According to him, two vehicles loaded with food items, as well as more than 20 passengers, were carried on the boat at the time of the accident.

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“The weight was too much for the boat. With the ongoing bridge construction, the navigable path has become narrow, and the boat could not remain stable under such a load,” Moor said.

Chairman of Buruku Local Government Area, Raymond Zege Aondoakura, who confirmed the incident on Tuesday to journalists, said security agencies were handling the situation and rescue teams were still combing the river.

Asked about how many people lost their lives to the incident, Aondoakura said, “Once the police conclude the investigation, you can call me.” and declined further comment.

Meanwhile, the Benue State Commissioner for Marine and Blue Economy, Dennis Iyaghigba, expressed deep concern over the tragedy, describing it as a stark reminder of the dangers of unsafe and unregulated river transportation.

In a statement by his media aide, Lubem Gena, the commissioner said a full-scale investigation had been launched to determine the immediate and remote causes of the incident, including possible violations of safety regulations.

He extended the government's condolences to the families of the victims and the Buruku community.

The spokesperson for the state police command Udeme Edet, said the command was yet to receive a formal report on the incident.

The River Buruku is one of the rivers in the state where boats are needed to cross to other local government areas in the state, such as Logo and parts of Ukum LGA, due to its shortcut.

Successive administrations, right from the military regime, have promised to construct a bridge across the river to ease the movement of people, even from Taraba State.