

11 funeral guests feared dead in Benue boat accident

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A capsized boat.

By John Charles

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No fewer than 11 people, including a pregnant woman and six children, were feared dead when a boat conveying them from a burial ceremony capsized on the River Benue in the Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State.

According to a local source who simply identified himself as Daniel, the incident occurred on Saturday night.

Daniel told journalists in a telephone interview on Sunday that the victims were returning to the Daududawadawa community, an island settlement behind the Nigerian Army School of Military Engineering Barracks located in the North Bank area of the state capital.

The local source said that the ill-fated boat, which had about 40 people on board, capsized in the middle of the river between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. during a heavy downpour accompanied by a windstorm.

The commander of a local vigilante group, Operation Shara (Sweep), in North Bank, Nura Umar, who confirmed the incident, said that the victims were returning from the burial of a woman from their community at Wadata.

Umar said, “The deceased woman had been taken to a private hospital in North Bank on Saturday morning, where she later died, and the relatives and sympathisers from the island community decided

to take the remains to Wadata for her burial.

“After the burial, they boarded a boat to cross back to the Daududawadawa community. At about 7 p.m., heavy rain and strong winds started, and the boat capsized halfway into the journey.

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“There were over 40 passengers aboard the boat, but 11 were feared dead. We have recovered four bodies so far and buried them, while divers are still searching for the remaining victims.”

Umar further said that one of the survivors had a baby strapped to her back but lost the child in the accident.

When contacted, the state command spokesperson, Udeme Edet, said she had yet to receive any report about the incident.

The Chairman of Makurdi Local Government, Joseph Keffi, could not be reached as his phone rang out.

This is coming barely six months after the state government pledged to enforce rigorous safety measures to address frequent boat mishaps across the state’s waterways.

The state government had in January, through Friday, the Special Adviser to the Governor on Security and Internal Affairs, Joseph Har, launched a comprehensive enforcement initiative.

Under the new safety guidelines, the government emphasised the use of life jackets for all passengers, while boat operators were also expected to comply with safety regulations.