

5 killed, 4 injured in Ebonyi mining collapse

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From **Uchenna Inya**, Abakaliki

No fewer than five people have lost their lives in a mining pit collapse in Enyim Agalegu, Ikwo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

Four people were said to have sustained varying degrees of injuries in the incident.

The tragedy, which occurred on Saturday, in the community, happened in a pit said to be under the mining lease of First Patriots Limited, formerly known as Royal Salt, where illegal mining activities were allegedly ongoing.

Confirming the development, yesterday, at the scene, the National Chairman of Enyim Agalegu Edukwu Opeke Federated Union, Oboke Chukwuma Collins, said he received a distress call around 4pm, on Saturday, informing him that the pit had caved in on miners.

“Well, it was yesterday afternoon, around four, that I got a call that the people who engaged in illegal mining here collapsed and I rushed to this place,” he said.

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Collins explained that upon arrival, he mobilised community members to the scene, where they evacuated overburden covering the victims.

“We evacuated some overburden on top of some lifeless people, like three of them, and we rescued about four that were injured,” he said.

Collins noted that the community had previously written to the company and the state Ministry of Solid Minerals, requesting that the pit be released to the community for controlled mining, after the company allegedly completed work at the main pit. He described the activity at the site as illegal, noting that all efforts to secure approval from the company had been rebuffed.

“We engaged them (the company) in writing, even to the Commissioner for Solid Minerals, but they said no. So, we, the leadership of the community, backed off from the agitation,” he added.

Collins, who lamented the loss of lives at the site, said the recent deaths brings to a total of five people that have so far lost their lives at the site.

Also speaking to journalists at the scene, yesterday, the Commissioner for Solid Minerals Development in Ebonyi State, Chidi Onyi, described the incident as unfortunate and extended condolences to the families of the deceased.

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“It is never our interest or intention to lose some of our people who are under our care,” he said.

The commissioner attributed the recurring accidents in mining communities to illegal mining activities occasioned by greed and quest for money. He stressed that the government was not aware that the site had been abandoned.

“This site belongs to First Patriots. Both the state and federal governments are not aware that this site has been abandoned. The site is still very active,” he stated.

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He disclosed that the ministry had received letters from community leaders last year requesting that the company release part of the site to locals for mining.

He, however, noted that the ministry made it clear that it lacked the authority to grant such approval, since the land was under a private mining lease.

He said officials, including himself and the member representing Ikwo North Constituency in the Ebonyi State House of Assembly, Ifeanyi Nwakpu, had visited the site several times to address the matter.

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“The company vehemently said no and gave their reasons. They said that the pit is already dangerous and not the kind of place you allow artisans to work,” he said.

He added that some youths often sneaked into the site to mine against the company’s wishes, describing the development as carelessness. He noted that those sponsoring illegal mining operations often avoid the risks, while young unemployed miners bear the consequences.

“It is high time we prioritised lives above monetary value,” he said.

The lawmaker representing Ikwo North Constituency, Ifeanyi Nwakpu, said he was informed of the collapse, Saturday night, by the community leader, and immediately contacted the relevant authorities.

Nwakpu confirmed that the three deceased people had been recovered and deposited in a mortuary, while the four injured victims were receiving treatment at a hospital.

“As of now, what I am aware of is three dead people and four other people injured,” he said.

He added that it was not yet clear whether the victims were staff of the company or artisanal miners.

The lawmaker revealed that he had previously advised the company to either close the pit if it was no longer in use or properly secure it to prevent further casualties.

He also confirmed that he endorsed a letter from the community, requesting the release of the site to allow locals remove the overburden and mine it in a controlled manner.

The lawmaker said efforts were ongoing to determine the full circumstances surrounding the collapse, and whether more people might still be trapped. The Chief Security Officer of the Mining Company, First Patriots Limited, Eze Stephen, said security agents had tried repeatedly to stop the people from engaging in illegal mining at the site, but have been vehemently resisted by the villagers.

“There was a time the company wanted to cover it, but the youth mobilised and came here and stopped it. They threatened to cause trouble if the company tried to cover it.

“Many times we have tried to stop them from mining it illegally, but they have refused. They come both at night and in the day. And when they are there, you can’t fire at them because it is dangerous, and you don’t want to make them fall into the water while running, and die,” he said.