

## Presidential tragedy: 20 die in PH rally stampede, 29 injured

By DENNIS NAKU, Port Harcourt

**T**HE Presidential Campaign flag off of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the South-South zone yesterday marred by a stampede that resulted in the death of at least 20 persons at the Liberation Stadium, Elekahia, venue of the event in Port Harcourt, Rivers State capital.

No fewer than 25 persons, mostly women were also injured, at the time of filing this report.

In a related development, two persons lost their lives in an accident involving the presidential convoy along the ever-busy Port Harcourt-Aba road, in the centre of Port Harcourt.

*Sunday Champion* observed that the stampede was caused by security operatives who prevented those who wanted to leave the stadium, through the major exit point, because the President was still addressing the crowd.

Our correspondent who was at the arena further observed that many of the supporters left their seats and dashed straight to the stadium's major entrance after they had confirmed that their governorship candidates had been presented with the party flag.

But, no sooner had they reached the gate than the security operatives stopped the large crowd from leaving, on the grounds that the President was still speaking, and that it would amount to a distraction.

An eye-witness observed that the situation turned ugly when a police man shot into the air to disperse the crowd, creating panic, but on seeing the surging crowd, the security operatives, comprising police, soldiers and officials of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) decided to throw the gate open.

In the ensuing rush, scores of people trampled on one another, leading to the death of over 20 persons, mostly women who had come to show support to their governors and the President.

Corpses of some of the casualties littered the main entrance leading to the stadium mangle, even as several others were still unconscious about 3pm, after the President had left the stadium.

It was learnt that, a Prado jeep in the convoy of the President with Bayelsa registration number AX 176 KMK heading to the stadium rammed into a stationary truck on Aba road, killing two of its occupants on the spot, while several persons were injured.

An eye witness who did not want his name in print said the jeep was trying to move into it actual position, when it veered off the road and ran into the truck.

Meanwhile, the Rivers State government has described the incident as unfortunate, saying it was due to a stampede and poor crowd control measures.

Mr. Blessing Wikina, Press Secretary to Governor Chibuike Amaechi who stated this said the governor immediately mobilised its medical services to take care of these injured.

The Rivers state Traffic Management Authority evacuated the corpses to the hospitals. The also assisted to take the wounded to the hospital as at the time of this report.

Wikina said, "The incident is regrettable, including the accident that happened at Aba road. As I speak to you ambulances are still going there to take care of those who are injured."

Confirming the incident, the Rivers State Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), Dr. Rita Inoma-Abbey confirmed the incident to *Sunday Champion*, but could not say the exact casualty figure.

Inoma-Abbey, a Superintendent of Police (SP) said, "at about 14:50 hours at the liberation stadium,

Elekahia during the presidential campaign flag off for the South-South zone.

"Lots of jubilant supporters were exiting the main gate that their governors had been given the PDP flag. Those coming in were pushing and their way out. in the ensuing stampede, so many people fell down.

"The police mounted troops, Police Mobile Force (PMF) and other security agents contained the push by closing the main gate to rescue the victims. Some were taken to clinic with police ambulance.

"Some to Teme clinic and Braithwaite Memorial Hospital (BMH) for treatment. Identities of casualties and number of death unknown," the police image maker said, adding that preliminary enquiry is on-going.

However, the Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO), Dr. Rita Inoma-Abbey, confirmed that 11 died, including 10 women and one man, while 29 others are receiving treatment at BMH, Teme and Police Clinic.

The President directed the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) to set up a panel headed by an Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG) on the incident from tomorrow (Monday) in Port Harcourt.