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**Pipeline fire: 300 victims get mass burial •IG orders arrest of fuel hawkers**

SOPURUCHI ONWUKA, MANSUR OLADUNJOYE and TUNBOSUN OGUNDARE

ABOUT 300 victims of the Tuesday's pipeline fire at Abule Egba, a Lagos suburb were yesterday, given a mass burial, just as Federal Government announced plans to set up a joint police/military task force to smash illegal syndicates involved in vandalizing pipelines and siphoning petroleum products across the country.

This is as Inspector-General of Police (IGP), Mr Sunday Ehindero, directed all state Commissioners of Police (CPs) to clear the roads of fuel hawkers and arrest black marketers.

Ehindero gave the order yesterday, while fielding questions from newsmen at the scene of the disaster.

The police boss, who arrived the site in a blue Peugeot 406 saloon car, marked NPF 01 at 11.20 am, lambasted black marketers and vandals for their criminal activities, causing monumental tragedies and economic sabotage in the country, just as he described the carnage as "tragic and sad."

IGP vowed to set up a Special Squad to be christened Pipeline Vandalisation Squad (PVS) to wage a relentless war against vandals in the country, disclosing that the squad would comprise the police and other security agencies teaming up to fight act of vandalisation.

Ehindero said the police had set up a team in Edo, Delta and some other areas to monitor the activities of vandals, adding that more than 100 vandals had so far been prosecuted.

"We have taken measures to ensure that people desist from acts of vandalisation of pipelines but despite that, it persists. We are going to impose a tougher measure this time around," he said.

He spoke, just as Minister of State for Petroleum Resources, Dr Edmund Daukoru, said the state of pipeline vandalisation and stealing of products from the nation's pipelines have escalated recently to worsen the crisis of supply in the market.

The victims, whose identities could not be ascertained as they were burnt beyond recognition, were said to have been buried around 2.am at Ajala area on Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway.

The bodies of the victims were buried after Muslim and Christian clerics have prayed for the repose of their souls.

Both Mr Ehindero and Daukoru speaking at the scene of the inferno, yesterday expressed regrets at the high human toll and exposure of residents to great risks.

While describing the incident as a monumental human tragedy, Mr Ehindero said the police under his administration would review its operations strategy to inject more force in dealing with crime in the country.

In response to the recent surge in crime across the country, he said, the police has started taking delivery of more arms and equipment to outclass the criminals in the use of fire power.

He said the equipment would be immediately deployed for crime combat across the country to bring all criminals operating in the country to book in the next few months.

Referring to causes of fuel scarcity in the country, he blamed the situation on the activities of pipelines vandals and illegal fuel marketers using street hawkers to sell the products at exorbitant prices.

He directed all commissioners of police in the country to arrest all those hawking the products along the roads, but warned them to carry out the task in a manner that would not lead to fire incidents.



Countryman



Turning to the Lagos State Commissioner of Police, Mr Emmanuel Adebayo, along with Julian Okpalake and Mrs Bose Daodu, Commander Area 'G' who accompanied him to the scene, the IG instructed him to commence arrest of fuel hawkers without further delay.

He also charged the CP to deploy all police intelligence units available to him in fishing out those responsible for pushing the products into the street.

The police, he said, has arrested and prosecuted over 100 pipeline vandals and also seized several tankers used in siphoning products from punctured pipelines.

Mr Ehindero regretted that the human face he injected in the attitude of the police to the public was proving counter productive, declaring that more force would be injected in the operations of the police to restore respect for law in the society.

He appealed to the public to show higher sense of responsibility by exposing criminals to enable the police to avert such disasters and tragic incidents.

When he arrived, Dr Edmund Daukoru described the incident as a shame on the vandals and syndicate that punctured the pipe, "saying their quest for petty cash has led to death of hundreds of men, women and children."

He regretted that the vandals have developed high technical capacity for hot tapping on pressurized pipelines, adding that the police did not respond to calls when residents tried to alert them on such activities.

At the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH) Ikeja, where 72 victims of the fire are receiving treatment, Dr Daukoru expressed the confidence that the personnel would rise efficiently to the challenge of saving lives.

Chief Medical Director of the hospital, Dr Femi Olugbile, however, said most of the victims were still in the danger list, explaining that they sustained high degree burns.

He said the victims have been quarantined for special attention and reduced exposure to infection.