

# Pipeline explosion: The wages of greed

## THURSDAY COLUMN

RAYMOND TAREK BELLEH

CHRISTMAS has hardly passed by before our friend Disaster has come knocking as if to collect belated Christmas gifts. Once again the Nigerian sky is filled with dark deadly smoke, indicating another gruesome catastrophe has just taken place. This time it has come in the form of a pipeline explosion, a now familiar occurrence to anyone who watches the Nigerian Disaster Measuring Barometer. This time round it has extinguished the lives of about 700 people and maimed many more for life, just as it has destroyed property and caused untold woe and sorrow.

We have only just recovered from the Sokoto bound plane crash which claimed the lives of the Sultan of Sokoto and many others. And just this past May did a similar pipeline blast kill up to almost 200 people somewhere on the outskirts of Lagos. It begs the question - will Nigerians ever learn? Is it likely to happen again? As much as I wish it wouldn't, I am afraid to say that it more than likely would. It more than likely would because those in authority are yet to fully grasp the importance of health and safety, or the idea of prevention as opposed to cure. It more than likely would happen again because our people are yet to overcome their insatiable need for 'instant gratification'.

One would be forgiven for thinking that there might be an invisible evil monster, roaming every corner of this nation, plucking planes from the sky, setting pipelines ablaze, and just taking lives at will. In truth, the only demons that exist probably reside in the heads and minds of some Nigerians, politicians and citizens alike, who fueled by greed and a desire to make a gain at the slightest opportunity carry out unthinkable actions that endanger the lives of their fellow citizens.

Nigeria is full of contradictions. I have never seen a more intelligent group of people create their own misfortunes, fuel their own fires and dig their own graves. The average Nigerian thinks he's smarter than everyone else. We are smart all right but collectively we create the most stupid and unimaginable calamities. In a nutshell we are too smart for our own good. Too greedy to know when we are satisfied. Too arrogant to accept the flaws that exists. Too conceited and power conscious to allow those who can do a better job to go ahead and do so. So is it any wonder that Nigeria is once again on the international media radar, depicting itself as nation regularly visited by disasters and without the foggiest idea how to prevent them. And when they do occur, we do not have the necessary safety and infrastructural apparatus to minimize the extent of the damage to lives and property.

Nigeria doesn't need a war. Armed robbers, ritualists, air disasters, road accidents and pipeline explosions are all doing a great job of sending enough people to their early graves. It certainly holds the record as the nation with the highest number of disasters with the greatest

frequency of occurrence. I know some might argue that disastrous incidents like this in a nation with a population of about 140 million are inevitable. However this argument is flawed when we look at the 'disaster radar' of other nations who dwarf Nigeria in the population stakes - Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Russia and the USA. Let's take Bangladesh and Pakistan for instance, two countries who, according to Transparency International, outdo Nigeria when it comes to corruption, but even they cannot measure up to us when it comes to man-made calamities.

It signifies that Nigeria has a huge deficiency when it comes to the provisions of basic amenities, particularly in areas of health and safety. It is a very cultural place, but seriously missing two key cultures which it needs to embrace promptly and steadfastly for the sake of its people - they are the cultures of maintenance and planning. The absence of these two vital components has been a major contributory factor to many of the problems, difficulties, accidents, disasters, you name it, that Nigeria has faced and continues to. These two cultures affect every considerable area of a nation's existence and development. The number of aviation disasters are a testimony to the laxity and reactive maintenance culture that exists in every area of our operations. It wouldn't have been so bad if we had resigned to living our lives in the most basic manner, but Nigerians want all the trappings of West, forgetting that to have and sustain these things, certain rules apply.

This Nigerian need for 'instant gratification' regularly trips him up. He wants the farm to bear wonderful fruits every month but doesn't see the need to till the soil, pull out the weeds and water the crops. He wants to be seen in the most beautiful cars but fails to realize that these are not compatible with treacherous road conditions. We want the earth to continue to pump oil to pay for our voracious materialistic needs but fail to provide all the necessary materials that will ensure

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this is done in the safest and most effective manner. We could easily ask other oil producing countries how they safeguard their pipelines, but they may not even have specific methods as they probably do not have the experience of daft citizens breaking into pipelines to steal oil.

So, as much as I sympathize with the victims of this latest pipeline catastrophe, there's a part of me which feels that those who were actually taking oil from the burst pipe only got what they were asking for. A popular adage states that "if you play with fire, you are bound to get burnt." If after all the documented incidents of pipeline explosions have not taught people to stay well away from these sites, then they deserve what they get. For they would have knowingly been playing with fire. They say 'everyday for the thief, one day for the owner'. The owner in this case is nature - it says "I have given you this rare commodity as a blessing, but you are hell bent on turning it into a curse. If you handle it with the due care it deserves it will serve you well and help provide for your many needs. However, if you treat it roughly it would explode in your face." Therefore my real sympathy lies with the many innocent workers and by-standers who became victims of the actions of a stupid and desperate few. All the same I extend my condolences to everyone affected by this terrible tragedy, for what affects them affects us all, as human beings and as a society.

Time and time again Nigerians fail to heed nature's warning. So far, this gift of oil, in the hands of greedy, short-sighted and corrupt leadership, has been more of a curse than a blessing. Their collective maladministration is the root cause of this and many other setbacks Nigeria has experienced. Just look at all other nations who share this nature's wonderful gift with us - Kuwait, Norway, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, to mention but a few, and you will find affluence, organization, necessary infrastructure, continued development, all end products of the gift of oil. Nigeria on the other hand reflects the complete opposite - alarming poverty, crumbling or none existent infrastructure, filthy environments and the absence

of appropriate healthy and safety measures which result in the kind of tragedies we have just witnessed. Look at how Hugo Chavez is using the proceeds from oil to transform the fortunes of the Venezuelan people. At this rate they probably won't mind him ruling for ever.

When will we turn this oil gift into the blessing it is supposed to be? How does one assimilate the fact that a nation ranked 12th in the world list of oil producing countries has to rely on imported oil. Or comprehend that an oil producing country experiences severe oil shortages. It just doesn't add-up, but certainly adds to the frustrations most Nigerians feel, particularly those in the Niger Delta area who have been disenfranchised for so long. One visit to these areas and you don't need to be a professor to determine that a serious marginalisation and neglect has been in operation for years. Poor leadership example has helped breed the terrible human trait of greed in many Nigerians, with everyone looking to make a fast buck by any means necessary, risking their lives and those of others in the process. This greed machine, if not stopped, will claim more lives, by design and accident.

The fact that we are such a large nation should be the very reason to strive to manage our affairs conscientiously and effectively. For the ripple effect of setbacks in countries like ours is usually felt on larger scale. There are more mouths to feed, more minds to educate, more bodies to clothe and provide shelter for. These disasters are far too catastrophic and frequent to ignore as just one of those things that happen. I know that change is in the offing but we need to speed it up before more needless tragedies befall our people. There is a new sense of awareness amongst Nigerians like never before. An awareness that things can be done far more better than they are currently being done. The enlightened will have to educate and inform the unenlightened so that overall standards can improve. This is the practice anywhere in the world progress and development is witnessed.

We must embrace the saying 'if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail'. What we do today will determine tomorrow. I know eventually the time will come when those who have so mismanaged this country will look on from their graves to see a new and different Nigeria - with good roads, cleaner environments, constant electricity and water supply, better educational facilities, all the amenities they failed to provide when in control, opting instead to enrich themselves, family and close associates. They will be so amazed with what they see that they'll wish they were alive to enjoy it. Then disasters of this nature will be things of the past. Fanciful thinking? Well, someone's got to hope for this country.