



## Katugal fuel inferno

**A**NOTHER gory sight of hundreds of charred bodies of Nigerians roasted in a petrol-scooping fire greeted the world in the dying days of March in Katugal village of Kagaraka local government of Kaduna State.

In the fire, according to reports, over 100 persons—women, children, adult males were burnt beyond recognition which made a mass burial of their remains inevitable.

The Kaduna inferno was reminiscent of the 1998 Jesse, Delta State, fire and last December's Abule Egba (Lagos) incidents that claimed scores of hundreds of lives.

But while the Jesse and Abule Egba fires were occasioned by pipe-line vandals who breached the petrol pipe-lines to siphon fuel for sale, the Katugal melt-down was purely a result of negligence.

Reports had it that a petrol delivery tanker loaded with 33,000 litres of fuel travelling to Kaduna from Suleija had fallen at a road side near the village. The villagers, instead of getting worried about the environmental impact of the spilt fuel, busied themselves scooping the fuel, oblivious of any dangers. In the process, a spark had ignited the sitting petrol bomb that reduced the villagers into a ball of fire.

Of the over 110 victims, 39 were said to have been secondary school students.

About 15 motorcycles were burnt. Almost every family in the village lost at least one of its members.

And all this happened in spite of the fact that both the driver of the petrol tanker, and worried-village elders, had warned the victims of the possible risks in scooping fuel from the fallen tanker which went up in flames about two hours after it had fallen by its side.

Without prejudice to the fact that other purely innocent victims may have been engulfed in the ball of flame, questions still arise about the nation's level of desperate poverty, lack of emergency rescue and evacuation capacity, and the sort of mass ignorance that propels citizens to take suicidal steps in their quest for their mythical daily bread.

Why do Nigerians risk limb, imprisonment and even their lives in the quest for momentary gratifications? Why have the authorities blatantly and criminally refused to put in place accident management process and procedures? What is it that drives Nigerians to scavenge and seek to gain in others' misfortunes like seeking in a fuel tanker accident an opportunity to better their lives?

These are the questions that arise from the Katugal inferno.

Understandably, millions of our citizens are dirt poor, living even below the United Nations recognised poverty level.

But is that why these numerous-poor will risk their lives to get along in life?

All too often Nigerians are fed with reports of citizens who arrive at ordinary accident scene not to aid and help victims who might be injured, unconscious and needing medical attention, but simply to riffle through their pockets and bags to steal their cash and other valuables.

All too often we have witnessed dangerously abandoned vehicles on our motor ways kill other unwary motorists because basic precautionary measures are not taken. If the fallen Kaduna petrol tanker had been properly managed by the agencies charged with accident and other disaster management, perhaps the roasted citizens of Katugal village would have been prevented from committing the economic suicide that ended in their sad lots. Perhaps better roads and their maintenance would have prevented the petrol-tanker from falling to its side, in the first place.

If the dire ignorance and lack of informal education in the land had been aggressively touched, perhaps the poor souls of Katugal would have been aware of the inflammable nature of petrol.

If the dire poverty in the land had been addressed, and the ostentatious display of the rich curtailed to socially non-provocative levels, perhaps those Kaduna indigenes would not have been driven to desperation in their bid to grab what they saw as their shares of the national cake.

The Katugal fuel inferno is one too many.

For this, there is urgent need for the re-ordering of the nation's ethical, moral, economic and political priorities in ways that accommodate the nation's poor, the ignorant and the desperadoes who occasion social catastrophies just because they see a few enjoying the fat of the land while the many hunger.

A general and comprehensive re-orientation and revaluation of our morals is imperative in these fluid reformative times.

This is not in any way suggesting that citizens, due to acute poverty should cut their economic noses to spite the nation's political face. But a situation where citizens are compelled by socio-economic and political forces to take unreasonable risks should worry those who rule and those who aspire to rule.

While poverty should not be an excuse for economic suicide, the great willingness of citizens to engage in anti-social and anti-personal acts and behaviours needs to be addressed by those in authority.

Meanwhile, to the families of those unfortunate victims of the Katugal fuel inferno, we can only say that they should take heart and pray that no such sinister opportunity presents itself in future for their sons, daughters, fathers and mothers to be consumed by raging petrol fire.

And to the dead: may their souls rest in peace.