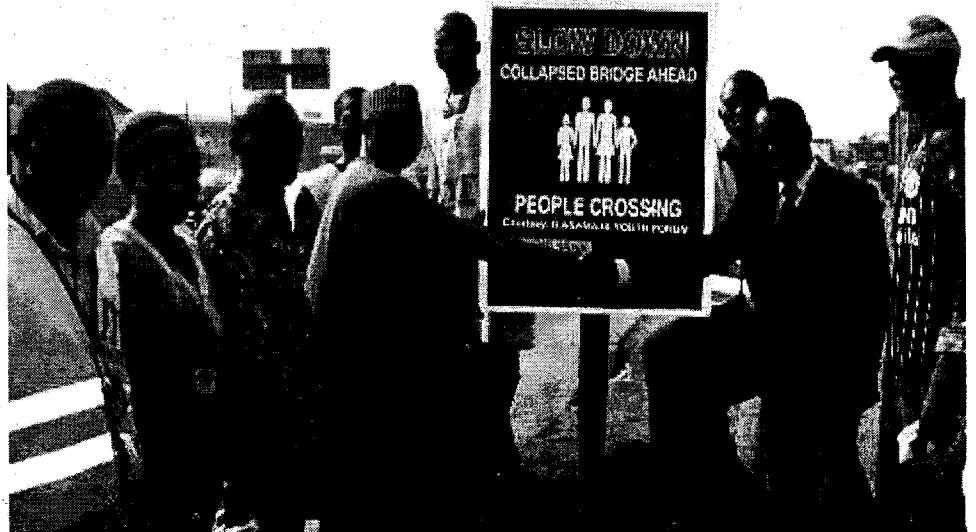




•Pedestrians dashing across the expressway (Inset is the late Olatunji Jimoh).



•Unveiling of the road sign sponsored by Oceanic Bank.

Collapsed bridge: Death toll skyrockets

CHUKWUDI OBI accompanied the Ilasa Youth Forum on a condolence visit to Mrs Jimoh, widow of late Olatunji Jihoh who was the latest victim in the series of pedestrians crushed to death while running across the expressway following the recent collapse of the Ilasa pedestrian bridge.

Clad in a white wrapper and black headscarf, Mrs Jimoh, a mother of ten and grandmother, sat quietly in a corner of her face-me-I-face-you residence at 26 Aje Street Ilasamaja. Her eyes were swollen and red. The compound itself appeared deserted except for a few tenants and most of the ten children of bereaved Mrs Jimoh whose husband Olatunji was ran over by a speeding vehicle while trying to dash across the Oshodi-Apapa expressway at Ilasa bus stop.

The woman appeared too weak to express her deep sadness. Her daughter, Mrs Fola Hassan, spoke on behalf of the family, stressing that her caring and amiable father died as a result of government's negligence of the collapsed bridge.

"We came back from market that Tuesday and heard that a car had hit him and that was it. It was because the bridge was not put in place. The federal government should have constructed another one so that people will not die. It is a risk crossing the road. Most of us panic a lot because of the risk involved in dashing cross the road. We are appealing to government to come to our aid and construct another bridge for us," She lamented.

As the Jimoh family is in mourning, so were the families of four school children who were crossing the road when a fast moving car rammed into them. According to an eye-witness, while some sustained various degrees of injury, some died.

The number of deaths recorded since the bridge collapsed over a month ago is estimated to be more than 18. Action Congress, Youth Leader Ward F2 Ilasamaja, put the number at 27. As a temporary temporary measure to check the incessant hitting of pedestrians crossing the road, the Action Congress Youths of Ilasamaja and Ilasa

Youth Forum, had taken it upon themselves to control vehicles and help pedestrians cross safely to the other side of the highway.

To this end, the management of Oceanic Bank Int'l Plc in conjunction with Ilasa Youth Forum, IYF, have constructed a road sign to alert motorists on the collapsed bridge and the need for them to slow down. The road sign is situated about 700 yards from the collapsed bridge in the median of the road.

The green coloured sign post reads:

Slow Down

Collapsed bridge

People crossing

Unveiling the road sign, the representative of Oceanic Bank Int'l Plc noted that the gesture was in a bid to reduce the high of accidents on the spot. He stated that the bank acknowledged the efforts of Ilasa Youth Forum and the Baale which is why the bank collaborated with them.

"Two weeks ago, they came to us and told us of this thing. We like what they are doing to help reduce the high rate of accidents on this road. That is why we at Oceanic Bank Int'l doled out money to them to construct the road sign. We still have more things to do so that accidents on this road will reduce pending when government will do something," he said.

Also speaking at the event, Baale of Ilasamaja, Abereijo, Abdul Fatai Adeshina emphasized the importance of the highway saying it leads to two important ports in the state. The Baale expressed sadness over the loss of lives on the highway, stating that the urgency of the matter warranted them to take some form of temporary measure to arrest the menace of fatal accidents at the bus stop.

His words: "We have children who go to school crossing the highway. Many other people also use the highway. You cannot

imagine how sad I feel when I am told that a life has been lost on that road.

"So we did not want to fold our arms waiting any longer for the federal government to do something. We acted so that we can reduce the number of deaths recorded on the street. Oceanic Bank Plc saw and appreciated our efforts and we thank them for that.

While we are still waiting for government to do something, we appeal to other private companies to come and partner with us. Life has no duplicate. There is need for us to preserve the life of every Lagosian.

"Tell government to come and repair this bridge or build another one. People cannot be dying here everyday and they close their eyes as if they do not see. Is it when one of theirs is crushed that they will know that the situation needs urgent attention?"

At the collapsed pedestrian bridge, Daily Champion saw a large number of people waiting on both sides of the road for vehicles to subside before crossing. Limping on one leg and supporting herself with a walking stick, an aged woman among the group was appealing to anybody that cared to listen to her, to please tell the government to repair the bridge without further delay.

Also in the crowd was a mother of two,

who was dragging both children along. Her alert eyes were focused on the traffic. The traffic officer soon flagged all on-coming motorists to a halt and the woman tried to drag the children across. On seeing their reluctance to dash across as others are doing, she gave them a mild slap on the shoulder to ensure compliance.

Most of the casualties being recorded at the Ilasa bus stop following the collapse of the bridge were victims of hit-and-run drivers. According to the President, Ilasa Youth Forum, Mr. Abu Olawale Raymond, his group have held several meetings on how to help minimise accidents at the bus stop.

"We now came up with the idea of guiding people to cross safely across the expressway. Our duty will be stop vehicles, let the people cross and allow the vehicles to pass. A lot of deaths have been recorded on the road. About 27 people have been killed so far. However, we are alone in this job. We offer our services from 7 a.m to 9 a.m. The reason is that most of us are students and workers. We have to take care of our personal duties and also think of the duty we owe to the society."

Mr. Olawale Raymond who is a 200 level student of Lagos State University,

LASU, regreted what he described as the harassment they face in the hands of uniformed men.

According to him, when such uniformed men are told to stop for pedestrians to pass, they do not stop and even go ahead to molest some of his members. Further, the group's president alleged that at least four of his members have been harassed by uniformed men, noting that they are not worried about the development. He added that the group in collaboration with some private bodies have also embarked on a project to make road signs that will help pedestrians in crossing the highway freely. He called on the government to step up their plans to construct another bridge for them.

Apart from members of the Ilasa Youth Forum, another set of people you see helping pedestrians to cross the bridge are a group of people from a political party, Action Congress, AC.

According to the AC youth leader, Ward F2, Ilasamaja, Femi Showunmi, on November 10, a day after the incident, motorists started knocking pedestrians down. The casualties, he said, was on the high side.

"It is a daily occurrence. Some people were killed outrightly, others recorded degrees of injuries. Some of the culprits are hit and run drivers. At times the casualty daily is up to five.

"As a result of this situation, AC under my leadership deemed it fit to organise ourselves and come to the rescue of our people. To this effect, we abandoned our jobs, businesses, social life and families to do this. Our families do not like it but they have to understand that this is a call to service.

In his opinion, their efforts have yielded fruits as not many cases of accidents and deaths have been recorded ever since. According to him, the only challenge they are facing is from uniformed personnel who refuse to stop when they are told to stop.

"In fact the major problem we are facing here is just from the uniformed officers. They refuse to stop when they are told to and when they stop they beat us. More than four or five times yesterday, alone, my men were harassed and beaten up. I don't have any grudges at all. My belief is that there is nothing that does not come with its own problems. So this is our own problem.

"Let me use this medium to call on the Federal Government to do something quick about the bridge. I am aware the State Government has been working round the clock to ensure that something is done. But you must not forget that this is a federal road and it is the duty of the Federal government to maintain it," he said.



•Bereaved Mrs. Jimoh with her grand daughter