

FG's endless battle to protect pipelines

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LAST week, the some 60 people reportedly perished in a pipeline fire at Ikate village, one of the islands surrounding the Atlas Cove Jetty from where the petroleum products imported by government is pumped to Mosimi for onward distribution to other parts of the country.

The victims were thieves that organise to steal fuel products, especially the premium motor spirit also called petrol for quick cash in the loosely regulated open market where instant patronage is guaranteed.

According to officials of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), owners of the pipeline, the thieves had drilled three holes into the pipe as products were being pumped and were siphoning petrol which later ignited and consumed them.

The thieving vandals struck at about 3a.m on Christmas night, punctured directly on the line and were scooping fuel directly into jerry cans and loading same into waiting boats when fire ignited resulting in a blast.

While expressing regrets the loss of lives, NNPC reiterated that pipeline vandalism remains a serious economic crime that requires support of all well meaning Nigerians to stop, and appealed to communities along the pipeline right-of-way of the corporation to report all incidents of attempted pipeline tampering and vandalism to security agencies.

At the scene of the incident, thousands of loaded plastic cans were lined up for evacuation while outboard engine boats floated in the nearby water for all night trips to ferry the consignments to destination, but the owners and operators of the facilities lay dead, burnt beyond identification.

The incident would not be the only one in recent times neither would it be the least in

the number of fatal casualty.

A few weeks before the December 26 disaster, a senior official of the NNPC died while three of his colleagues sustained serious injuries while trying to put out a pipeline fire that resulted from the activities of vandals that successfully siphoned products and left the spill to spark into a fierce blaze.

Exactly at the same period previous year, greater number of people died in a similar fire blast at Abule Egba, a residential area of Lagos metropolis after thieves had broken a live pipeline, siphoned products to their trucking capacity and left the spill in the rowdy hands of a crowd of opportunists.

The Ikate incident was a boring replay of several similar incidents with greater human tools along the pipeline routes on the coastal areas of tiny islands link the Atlas Cove, including Ilado, Ijesha Legbo, and almost every other spot in the remote islands to where accessibility is limited to marine vehicles and helicopters.

In these coastal areas, the pipelines are shallow, easily dug open and vulnerable to vandalism by economic saboteurs and thieves that also operate illegal trading operations also called black market.

In the inland areas too, the pipeline routes are all dotted with points of vandalism at places like Isiala Ngwa and Isuikwuato in Abia State, Ojo and Ikeja in Lagos State, Arepo, Mosimi and Sagamu in Ogun State, and other innumerable spots in Rivers and Delta states.

While these spots have been enriching criminals who steal the products for sale, the prices of their activities go beyond the value of the products stolen or even including the cost of repairs on the pipeline. The actual cost aggregates both the quantifiable and non quantifiable ones, including

spill impact on the environment, facilities shut down and associated down time, cost of regular although ineffective surveillance on the pipeline, and ultimately the lives of thousands of Nigerian men, women and children lost in fire blasts that regularly draw attention to the underground industry once in a while.

According to the Group General Manager, Group Public Affairs Department of NNPC, Dr. Levi Ajuonuma, vandalism remained the greatest threat to effective and efficient supply and distribution of petroleum products.

For example, the NNPC suffered 971 cases of pipeline vandalism in 2004, 2,258 in 2005 and 2,912 cases in 2006 and a substantial number in 2007, he pointed out, stressing that the corporation needed the support of all and sundry to fight the menace of pipeline vandalism.

So many questions have been asked about the difficulty in protecting the pipeline from the thieves and sundry vandals. To this, the Chairman of Geometrics Power Limited, Professor Barth Nnaji, had classified vandals into two main categories to be those breaking the pipelines to press home political demands and those who break them to make commercial profits in terms of stolen products, contracts for repairs, spill clean up, or demand for compensation.

While the first category of vandals involves principal actors in the Niger Delta crisis whose resolution the government is vigorously pursuing, they attack mainly crude oil pipelines and are responsible for the outage of the feedstock conduits to the Warri and Kaduna refineries.

The second group comprises the thieves that siphon products from live pipelines in a process termed *hot tapping*. It is the thieves that pose the threat of perpetual danger and wreaks

the greatest havoc to the nation's scanty and fragile fuel distribution infrastructure.

The underground activity which gained ground with the era of acute fuel shortages in the country has since grown into a huge thriving industry which now threatens to assume a life of its own as a viable subsector of the petroleum business.

For years now all efforts to stamp out the practice with the use of conventional security forces have proved abysmally unsuccessful as recent cases of products stealing involved men of the security forces providing cover for the criminals during their nefarious activities.

Men of the task force raised against the practice by the Petroleum Tanker Drivers' Union of the National Union of Petroleum and Allied Workers (NUPENG) have severely paraded some policemen caught in pipeline vandalism and also alleged that the thieving syndicates enjoy inhouse support from men of Pipeline and Products marketing Company (PPMC), a subsidiary of NNPC.

But the former Group boss of NNPC, Mr Funso Kupolokun, had pointed out that the syndicates that bleed the pipelines of products are highly connected, tough, wealthy, well armed and tend to possess the technical skills required to achieve the level of sophistication required in plugging valves and conduits into highly pressurized grid.

He said there was little men of the PPMC could do when confronted with a deadly squad of criminals that have laid out resources on trucks, boats and sundry logistics for bulk transshipment of stolen fuel across land and water.

At Abule Egba, December 2006, villagers who gave account of the fire blast which took their neighbours in fell swoop said the thieves come in the company of mobile policemen and about a

dozen trailer tankers to siphon products all night.

At the Atlas Cove Jetty, the depot officials have on display hundreds of devices and accessories recovered from where the thieves had plugged them for regular operations. Most of the materials deployed in the business, NNPC officials say, are not by any means cheap.

Western zonal chairman of PTD, Alhaji Tokumbo Korodo, had told Business Champion in a chat that hot tapping was the business of the wealthy, saying poor people cannot afford the logistics for the crime and the high level connection to cover their tracks effectively.

He accused the law enforcement agencies of not showing enough commitment in combating the crime, insisting that no penal measure was applied to those caught by civilian vigilante groups and handed over to the police for prosecution.

According to him, some of those who are notorious for the crime had been severally caught by the tanker drivers' task force, and after being taken to the police normally came back to mock and threaten those that apprehended them. This, he decried had nullified efforts and resources committed buy NUPENG in fighting the scourge.

Pointing at possible collaboration of NNPC officials in the crime, Alhaji Korodo questioned how the thieves got to trace the pipeline tracks so well that they could dig the ground and bore straight to the pipes with precision. He also wondered how the vandals got to know when the pipeline is live with products.

At a briefing with newsmen last week, the new GMD of NNPC, Mr Abubakar Yar'Adua, decried the inability of the security and judicial systems in the country to bring the caught

vandals to book, lamenting that the crime has defied all security measures so far deployed against it.

He said however that new measures were being considered to ensure that deterrence was in force against vandals. One of the measures is contracting the host communities to mount vigilance against the vandals. With the communities benefiting from the security contracts, he argued, they would not only refuse to get involved, in the lucrative dangerous activity but also feel committed to protecting the pipelines.

Other options, he disclosed, are establishment of special forces, satellite monitoring, helicopter overflights, remote tamper sensors and relaying deeper using the directional drilling method with adequate cathodic protection for the pipes.

Managing Director of PPMC, Mr. Reg Stanley, had proposed the directional drilling, a technique used in the upstream oil and gas production, to relay pipes in the onshore locations and use of underwater pipelines at marine locations. This, he said, would make it harder for the thieves to reach the pipelines.

Mr. Yar'Adua said Nigerians still needed the pipeline for distribution of petroleum products as domestic supply of petroleum product still depends on massive importation through the Atlas Cove Jetty. This infers strongly that loss of internal refining capacity which has conferred strategic status on the import receiving terminals is a significant part of the problem.

Good news from Mr. Yar'Adua is that the nation's moribund refineries are coming back on stream to reduce pressure on the import conduit and possibly reduce the prevalence of vandalism on the Lagos axis. This will significantly cut the financial, environmental and human cost of pipeline breaking.