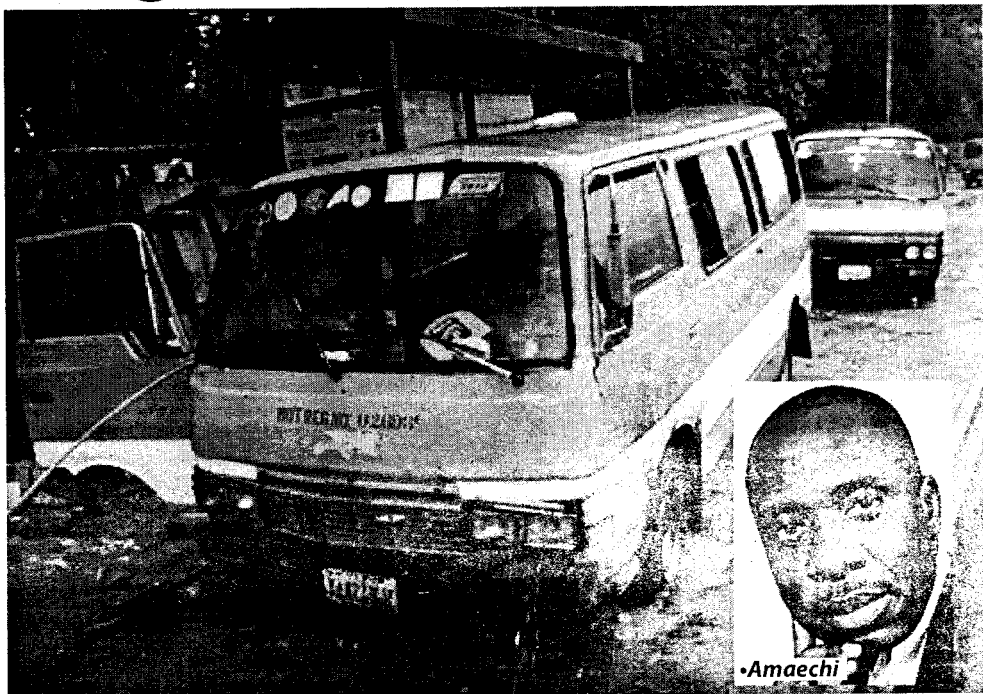
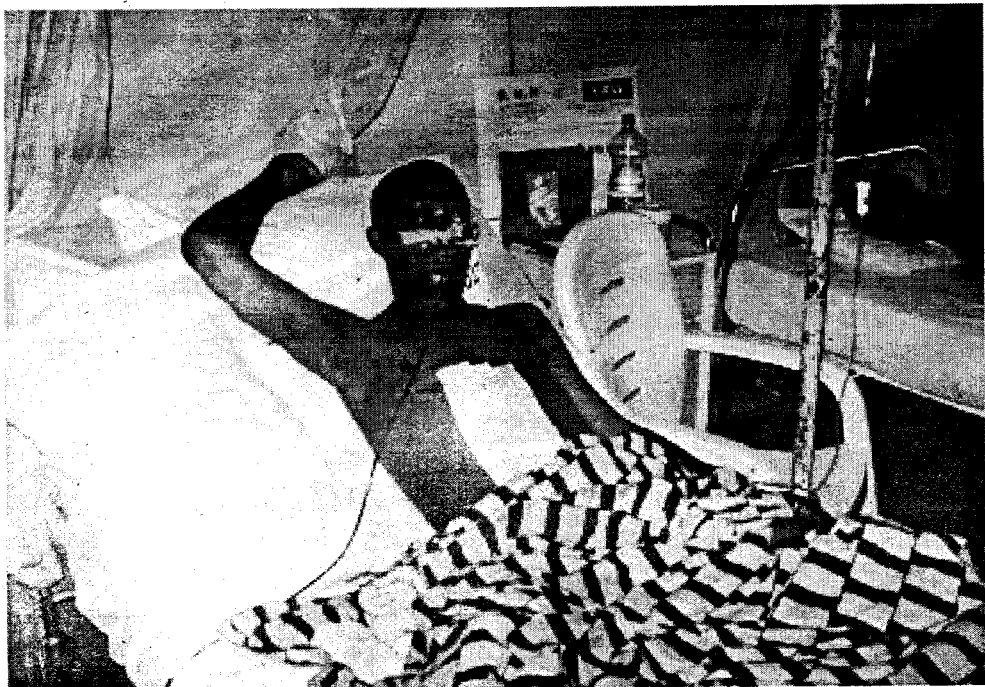


PH: How 50 perished in high tension disaster



Recently, residents of Port Harcourt were thrown into mourning as Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) high tension cable collapsed and killed over 50 persons, including pregnant mothers and babies while scores of others are in danger lists. Correspondent CHINEDU WOSU writes on the sudden tragic event.

It was a black Saturday in the oil rich city of Rivers State as scores of people including suckling babies and aged persons awaiting to catch a bus to their destinations were electrocuted by a powerful 33kva high tension cable belonging to Power Holding Company of Nigeria PHCN along the Slaughter community in Ogbinigba area of Port Harcourt.

The sad incident took place shortly after a heavy down pour that greeted the city with powerful winds and thunderstorms claiming the lives of struggling mothers and roasted over 50 persons beyond recognitions, just as other unconfirmed figures numbering over twelve's were rushed to different hospitals for medical treatment including the state owned Braithwaite Memorial Specialists Hospital BMH and the UPTH.

The electrocuted victims were mostly passengers in two commercial buses at the Oginigba Village Junction, hawkers, food vendors and newspapers vendors. Others included early morning workers, pregnant mothers that were taking refuge nearby, from the early morning rainfall. The calamity also reminds the residents of the killing of thirty women at Andoni community who went on a fishing spree in far Atlantic Ocean and were killed by a thunder storm.

The rise in the death toll at the scene of the incident was due to the illegal building of motor parks under the high voltage PHCN line that prevented victims from escaping despite the instant killing of passengers in two 18-seater buses that were conveying city dwellers to Aggrey area of the city.

Unconfirmed sources said, the death toll ranged from 30 to persons to 40 persons, while over 12 others are still critically injured at zoo area near the Port Harcourt Slaughter on Saturday morning.

The sad incident occurred shortly when a heavy rainstorm which hit the some party of the city in the early hours of Saturday, struck a tree-branch and fell on the high-tension line and fall on two buses loading under the dangerous PHCN wire.

Although it could not be ascertained how many people died instantly, an eyewitness who spoke from the scene of the sad event confirmed that about over 20 corpses were retrieved from the buses while others burnt beyond human recognition.

The high tension cable also shocked 14 bystanders who are receiving medical treatment at the Braithwaite Memorial Specialist Hospital (BMH)-owned by the state government.

The corpses of the victims have been deposited at BMH hospital as relatives and friend rush to the hospital to have a glimpse of their love ones

The black Saturday incident in Port Harcourt thronged the resident of the city into rude shock as relatives and friends, including husbands wail uncontrollably over the demise of their love ones.

Mr. Johnson Akpan, a Taxi Driver at the affected junction said when the horror happened he counted

over 84 death bodies lying lifeless and the rain was heavy.

"When the high voltage PHCN cable cut and descended on the buses and the bystanders a lot of persons were selling and eating food, drinking Alcoholic in the stalls and shanties located under the power line, passengers in the buses loading Aggrey road were roasted beyond recognitions while others were burnt half death".

Another eyewitness Mr. Martins West said heavy wind cut off the branches of trees at the zoological garden owned by Rivers State, which incidentally fell on the cable killing the victims.

According to him, there uncontrollable wailings, anger, frustrations and confusion over the alleged obsolete PHCN power line that were scattered indiscriminately exposing people to immediate danger.

Martins said most of the victims are people that are transacting business at the park

Former Chairman of Okujagu community in Rivers State, Mr. Felix Okujagu who spoke to this publication described the deaths as alarming and devastating and blamed the pathetic incident to Rivers Environmental Sanitation Authority RSEA for sacking the commercial bus drivers from the approved park before re-locating under the high voltage PHCN line.

"We the community people are not happy with the occurrence, it is a bad omen for people to die like tha, the incident was preventable if the PHCN officials took our early advice, but they ignored it, now many people have died and scores of others lying critical in danger list".

He appeals to Rivers State government to partner with PHCN to review the integrity of the power lines to avoid further deaths.

Pastor John Nwachuku of the Life Chapel Church described the incident as shocking and unbelievable as the densely populated community has gone, I rushed to the scene of the incident to witness the sad deaths that morning.

Contacted for comments, Rivers Police Public Relations Officer (PRO) Mrs. Innoma Abbey, a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), while confirming the incident said 10 persons died during the incident; while other security reports said over 50 persons were electrocuted.

Other security reports obtained by our correspondent said "At about 0930hours, report of a high tension wire falling due to the rain and electrocuting an unspecified number of persons (about 40 persons) around Slaughter Bridge, Port Harcourt".

She said: "The number of death now is ten, while twelve are unconscious. All of them are now at BMH. But we are going to spread our tentacles to ensure that we give security to such persons and advice them on the danger of loading under high-tension wire.

"For now, we have barricaded the place and our men are everywhere to prevent people from moving around there so that they will not get hurt. However, we have contacted the PHCN and they are already doing something. They have already come there to remove the wire. Very soon everything will come back to normal," Innoma Abbey explained.

Also speaking the Public Relations Officer, (PRO), PHCN, Mr. John Onye said no PHCN staff died in the incident and blamed the deaths on the collapse of High Tension Cable at the Oginigba Village. John Onye, said the company was still investigating the cause of the incident; but recalled that the company

had tried to warn the general public on the danger of either living or doing business under a high-tension line.

"We are still investigating and we are yet to come out with results of investigation. However, PHCN, Port Harcourt Zonal office sincerely apologize to the public, especially the bereaved families, on what has happened." This is a high-tension; we call it a 33kv high-tension line, serving Abuloma/Oginigba and its environs. When the rainstorm started this morning, as a result of that we had what is called 'a wire-cut'. The wire-cut fell on top of two buses loading under the high tension wire and there followed the electrocution.

"In 2005 we carried out a massive campaign against people trading or living under high-tension wire. We did that in 2005/2006 and it is ongoing. We have told people repeatedly that living under high-tension wire is a risky venture.

"At this moment, the management of the PHCN on top of the matter. First, we have isolated the air and other areas affected. We have put the sup out completely to prevent further loss of life and are investigation the whole matter right away", On said.

Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), P. Harcourt Zonal office also apologized to the general public, especially families of those affected in the accident. PHCN, Onye said have ordered for the immediate evacuation of traders and hawkers doing business at the incident point, disclosing that, the company had embarked on cutting of obstruction trees under the high tension wires to avoid mass death.

PHCN spokesman insisted that the sanitation of the disaster zone and the removal of shanties and stalls would create a healthy environment as the cutting process was supervised by top management staff of the company.

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) South/South Zone blamed the electrocution of over 30 Port Harcourt residents by high tension cables belonging to Power Holding Company of Nigeria PHCN to indiscriminate erecting of motor parks and shops under the danger lines.

NEMA also described illegal erection of motor parks and shops as disasters to human lives capable of causing havoc to humanity.

Assistant Zonal Co-ordinator, South/South, Mr. Benjamin Oghenah stated this to *Daily Champion* in the city, while reacting to the killing of 30 persons by PHCN cables at Oginigba Village near the Port Harcourt Zoo on Saturday Morning.

Oghenah said NEMA would embark on radical enlightenment campaign in the Zone to educate the masses on the risk at erecting structures and Motor parks under the PHCN lines and called on traders to desist from hawking under the danger lines.

NEMA said three persons among the victims lying critical in hospitals in Port Harcourt have died following the PHCN electrocution last weekend that killed over 30 persons.

NEMA also condemned the hawking of foodstuffs along the Port Harcourt railway lines, describing the illegal acts as risky and appeals to traders to think safe and safety.

The Assistant Coordinator also appealed to PHCN to stop indiscriminate running of live cables in the open to avoid further calamity.

He described the untimely deaths of the 30 persons in Port Harcourt as sad and painful, and advised pedestrians to desist from doing business in the danger lines such as gas, PHCN and water lines.

Oghenah called on PHCN to always lay their cables under grounds to avoid further disaster from the public, the body lauded the state government for demolishing illegal structures and shanties along the PHCN high voltage lines across the city

Speaking at the hospital, Governor Chibuike Amaechi said his administration would foot the medical bills of the burnt victims in the hospital. Represented by Secretary to the State Government, Mr. Magnus Abe, Amaechi said only 10 persons died at the incident and 13 others are receiving medical treatments and warned traders from hawking or trading under the powerful high tension lines.

He also sympathized with the bereaved families over the lost of their love ones, just as over three people receiving medical treatment had died.

Minister of State for Power Mallam Nuhu Somo Wya who visited the hospitals where the burnt victims were receiving medical treatments said the federal Government has set up a help desk in Port Harcourt to ascertain necessary details on February 13 electrocution in Port Harcourt.

He said this at the Braithwaite Memorial Specialist Hospital, (BMSH) Port Harcourt shortly after visiting victims the electrocution which occurred in Trans-Amadi area of Port Harcourt.

The Minister said the help desk to be supported by a medical team from Abuja would be saddled with the responsibility of liaising with the families of victims of the electrocution to ascertaining the remote and immediate problems they are going through.

Somo-Wya also said that the team to be supported with officials of the Port Harcourt Distribution Company would come up with a report that would enable the Federal Government and the Rivers State Government help victims of the disaster.

"This is something that affected human lives and whatever the federal government can do to support these families to ameliorate the suffering they are going through now, government would not hesitate to do it", Somo-Wya said.

Accompanied by top officials in the ministry as well as the Managing Director the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), Malam Labo Hussien, the minister said the visit was to assess the real situation on ground.

Somo-Wya who responded to reporters' questions on what government was doing to replace the obsolete equipment still being used by the PHCN, explained that efforts were on to review the whole network of electrical installation nationwide.

He noted that the reviewing process was a continuous, adding, "maintenance of PHCN equipment was a regular activity which PHCN has been involved to ensure qualitative delivery to its customers."

During his courtesy visit on Rivers Gov. Chibuike Amaechi expressed sympathy of the federal government to the families of those who died during the electrocution.

Dr Bernard Aprioku, the Chief Medical Director of BMSH, who conducted the minister round the ward, where the patients are being treated explained that 23 persons were affected by the electrocution, out of which 16 have died. Aprioku, who said that his hospital was a bit incapacitated in the area of facilities, said, "electrocution is a serious case medically, worsened by limited facilities.

"We have one functional intensive care unit, and some of the victims needed respiratory support and that is why we have to transfer some of the victims to the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital for further attention", he said.