



WHEN WILL THE BLOODSHED ON ABUJA-LOKOJA HIGHWAY END?



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Many motorists and commuters have lost their lives in usually ghastly manner on this 250 kilometer stretch of road in recent years. The Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) says it is now set to end the carnage.

The Federal Road Safety Corps, FRSC had early on that chilly Wednesday morning of April 3rd, 2013 stunned the world with a broadcast (for some, ironically, it was no news) when it reported that 18 persons had lost their lives in a fatal accident along the Abuja – Lokoja Highway.

For those who know that death corridor, it was just another deadly carnage claiming innocent lives. But for the families involved it was a tragedy of immense proportion.

The blackberry broadcast had read thus: "A crash that occurred in the early hours of today 03/04/13, around 01:35hrs at Fire Academy, Sheda, involving two vehicles, a Marcopolo luxury bus registered XG. 413 FGG, belonging to GUO Group of Company and a J5 bus XA 726 NSR resulted in the death of 18 men". It then added with deadly precision, that, "17 died on the spot while one later died at the University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Gwagwalada."

Subsequent media reports indicated that seven persons including two females and five men were injured in the accident.

Road safety officials on ground had additional information that the injured were taken to the University of Abuja Teaching Hospital. Also a total of 96 persons, 70 males and 16 females, were involved in the crash. 14 of the corpses were deposited in the morgue of the Teaching Hospital while four were deposited at the Kwali General Hospital.

For those familiar with reports emanating from that axis, the tale had a familiar ring to it. Many have gone to the great beyond via this highway. While many call the expressway a 'highway to hell,' others prefer to tag it a 'corridor of death.' Both groups may be right going by the amount of blood that has spattered the route in the past few years.

Data recorded by Aso Chronicle from the beginning of the current year shows that about 97 persons may have lost their lives on the highway since January. The number is believed to be much higher than this since some road mishaps may have escaped the media radar due to bureaucratic hurdles usually encountered accessing public information.

While the month of April recorded the highest with 29 deaths on the road via accidents, March recorded two cases. January also had an all time high of 19 while the month of July had 16. In August at present, about 14 persons have lost their lives on the death prone highway.

The highway which was awarded to four construction companies via a 4-section



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demarcation has witnessed the shedding of the blood of many road users. The first section of the expressway commencing from Zuba to Sheda Village Junction, with interception from Giri Village Junction to the Airport Link Road Junction was awarded to Dantata and Sawoe Construction Co. Limited. Section II, starting from Sheda Village Junction – Abaji was awarded to Reynolds Construction Company (Nig) Ltd; Section III of the road ranging to about 49.362km from Abaji – Koton Karfi was awarded to Bulletin Construction Co. Ltd and Section IV, from Kotonkarfi – Lokoja awarded to Gitto Construzioni Generali Ltd.

Many commuters feel the authorities are not doing enough to stop the carnage. Mr. Samuel Solomon, the Vice Chairman, National Union of Road Transport Worker (NURTW), Ogbomoso/Oyo route however believes the haphazard placement of diversion signs on the route is one of the major causes of accidents on the highway.

"From Giri junction to Lokoja, for the past five or six years, the road has been on construction and it is causing serious accidents daily especially at the diversions points placed without proper prior notification. Before motorists apply their brakes, they must have collided with the signs resulting in accidents," he stated.

He added that the road safety officials also cause problems. According to him, they suddenly jump into the road while signaling vehicles to stop for checks.

'Alhaji', once a commercial driver lost his right arm along the highway years back when he was involved in a fatal accident.

He fought back tears as he recollected the infamous pothole that led to the accident. He now survives through friends and benefactors. His friend, Abass who spoke on his behalf attributed the accidents to the lackadaisical acts of drivers of articulated trucks.

"These truck drivers usually cross the road while turning; they overtake indiscriminately, facing oncoming vehicles, this normally makes drivers to swerve into the bush," he said.

A motorist, Femi Babalola, however puts the blame on the slow pace of construction works on the highway. He said confidently, once the road is completed, accident figures will reduce drastically.

In his reaction, Zonal commander of FRSC in charge of the axis, Mr Austin Aipoh, said the commission is concerned about the needless carnage on the road and has marshalled a strategy to curtail it. He calls the initiative, 'Operation Shield 3.'

"It is a one week programme where we mobilize vehicles, equipment and men to this Zuba, Gwagwalada, Abaji-Lokoja up to Zariagi with a view to reducing road crashes. We had the first and second stages in the months of May and June. The essence is to check over speeding, dangerous overtaking, remove obstruction on the highway and also intensify public enlightenment. We realised that these are the major causes of road crashes along this route. Anytime we carry out this exercise, accidents drop.

"The management has urged us to continue the exercise and since we started it, we have been noticing good results. Now by the time you drive about 5 to 10 kilometres on the route, you must see one of our patrol cars stationed. When someone drives dangerously, we quickly go after him or her and caution them," he enthused.

He added that, "We also discovered along the line that there are numerous construction companies working along the road. We have heard discussions with them in the past to ensure that adequate warning signs and directional signs are placed on the numerous construction sites. We discovered that the movement of these dividers is so frequent that we have to keep pace with them. We have even assigned our head of operations to align with them because we discovered that they move frequently and at times forget to move their signs to their new sites. Sometimes, they do not have adequate illumination signs to warn motorists of the presence of these equipments. We are insisting they should put them on the roads."

He said adequate enlightenment efforts are equally going on targeting motorists. "90 percent (if not more) of the accidents we recorded on this road are fatal. They occur in the night between the hours of 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. in the morning."

With Operation Shield 3 in place, many motorists are optimistic that the era of carnage on the crucial link road would finally come to an end.