

TRAGEDY IN RIVER NIGER 150 CAUGHT UP IN BOAT MISHAP

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Written by Fidelis Mac-Leva, Ibrahim Hamza Muhammad & Garba Muhammad, Birnin Kebbi Hits: 108



. 40 Died, 100 Missing - NEMA
Hit a Stump and
. Villagers Use Fishing Nets to
Eyewitnesses
Bring Out Dead Bodies
State Mourns

Over 40 persons are feared dead after a boat carrying about 150 traders and wedding guests capsized last Friday in River Niger, about four kilometres offshore near Malale village in Borgu

local government area of Niger State.

The boat was ferrying people from Tungar Na'illo from neighbouring Kebbi State to a local market in Malale, when it hit a stump and broke into two, official of the Nigerian Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and locals told Sunday Trust last night. NEMA said further that about 100 persons were still missing as at press time.

At least 42 dead bodies were said to have been recovered from the river, even as search for more bodies was continuing at nightfall yesterday.

Residents said the body of the Village Head of Tungar Na'illo, Malam Garba Maigari, who was in the boat, was also missing in the waters.

One of the men involved in the rescue efforts who was interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Hausa Service yesterday, said fishing nets had been used to bring out about 16 bodies from the river.

He said the mishap occurred during an attempt by operators to repair the boat's engine, which went off, adding that no government agency had taken part in the rescue operation at the time of the interview.

Most of the passengers were on their way to the market to sell smoked-fish, while others were returning from a wedding ceremony in a neighbouring community in Kebbi State, it was learnt.

BOAT'S DRIVER CLAIMED ONLY 15 PERSONS SURVIVED

The spokesperson of the Niger State Emergency Management Agency (NSEMA), Malam Ibrahim Hussaini, said the boat's driver, one Dauda Santere Abubakar, and 15 others had survived the accident, adding that the driver had disclosed that only 80 people were onboard at the time the boat sank. However, other persons from the community who spoke variously claimed that the boat was overloaded and suffered from age-related mechanical problems.

Hussaini, earlier told Sunday Trust that details at his disposal were still sketchy, and that "the boat was believed to be carrying over 150 passengers, mostly traders [when it] capsized midway into its journey resulting in the drowning of the passengers."

"Efforts are being made to rescue possible survivors along the bank of the river or [to recover] the corpses of victims that were drowned. At the moment search and rescue is ongoing on the river and I will make the details of the incident available later as the agency has dispatched its officers to assist the villagers in the rescue efforts",

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he said.

A road safety official, however, told Sunday Trust in Kebbi State that about 30 people were rescued with two bodies of infants floating.

Similarly, an eyewitness, Ibrahim Yauri, told Sunday Trust that the incident occurred around 12 noon and that it took over three hours rescue operation to recover 42 bodies.

Ibrahim said the boat took off from Niger State to Warra when it met its Waterloo.

"The boat left Tungan Na-Ilo village in Niger State with traders and those attending a wedding ceremony. The boat broke into two as a result of overload and most of the victims are from Niger State. So far we have recovered about 42 bodies including two babies and many women," he said.

Another witness, Malam Adamu, said the rescue operation was still ongoing at the time of filing this report, "but it is very difficult because of the lack of equipment and adequate manpower."

A former vice chairman of Borgu local government, Saifullah Haruna Umar, told Sunday Trust that over 60 people, including women and children, were believed to have died in the mishap.

Haruna said reports from eyewitnesses had indicated that the ill-fated boat was pierced by a tree stump that was lying on the riverbed, breaking it into two and causing people to drown.

He said apart from carrying passengers beyond its capacity, the boat was equally overloaded with luggage and other personal effects.

"We will want to call on government to clear the river of these deadly stumps which have been causing accidents, especially for canoe riders who are not familiar with the route," he said.

But a source in Borgu Emirate said four bodies were initially removed from the waters on Friday, adding that another 17 were recovered yesterday.

"Some of them tried to swim to shore, but gave up later and died after getting exhausted because of the distance," he said.

"It is too early to know the exact number of people that have drowned at the moment, because most of the bodies will remain under the water until after about two or three days," he added.

He said the boat was old and rickety even before the accident.

It was gathered that though the villagers raised the alarm over the mishap at New Bussa, the local government headquarters, which is about 30 kilometres from Malale district market, effective rescue efforts were too late by the local divers who were mobilized by the local government officials arrived.

NIGER STATE MOURNS

The Secretary to the Niger State Government, Saidu Ndako, was also quoted as confirming the boat mishap, saying 42 people had perished "I received the information late in the night that a boat had capsized and 42 persons have drowned in the incident, while rescue operation is ongoing," the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), quoted him as saying.

"We believe that the boat was overloaded because its capacity was put at 60 passengers, but over 150 passengers were said to be on board during the incident. The debris in the swollen river may also have been responsible for the incident," he said.

Meanwhile, the Niger State governor, Mu'azu Babangida Aliyu yesterday commiserated with the families of the victims of the boat mishap.

Aliyu, in a statement signed by his Chief Press Secretary, Malam Danladi Ndayebo, described the accident as disheartening "at a time when government was grappling with the challenges of bettering the lot of the people."

He "urged those involved with water transportation to be more careful, especially during raining season when water level is usually high," the statement said, adding that "the state emergency management agency had since deployed its officials to the scene of the mishap to ascertain the extent of losses incurred with a view to compensate families of the victims."

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