

Digging at the risk of death

By Alex Abutu

Benue and Kogi states have so many things in common and this, maybe is not unconnected to the fact that the latter was created out of former: Despite the many years of separation occasioned by the creation of Kogi State by the Ibrahim Babangida administration, sand excavation still remains a thriving business in the two states.

In Otukpa, the headquarters of Ogbadibo Local Government Area of Benue State are many deadly sites created by continuous excavation of sand for construction purposes. Many able-bodied men now depend on this as means of their livelihood.

Women and children are not left out as scores of both young and old women participate actively in this trade to cater for their households.

During a recent visit by *Daily Trust* to one of the sites at Olachagbaha in Otukpa, tales of suffering and pain was evident as the young men and women go about the job.

The local government area has legalised the business, collecting taxes from builders and trucks that patronise the sites and sand from the sites in Otukpa are hot cake in Otukpo and environs where a six tyre tipper load is sold for as high as N15,000.

Agada, one of the young men who earn their living from digging at the site, told *Daily Trust*: "I have been digging here for some years now and in the process we have lost some of our colleagues. Last year the sand caved in and buried them."

"Most of us you see here are married and it is from here

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■ One of the women gathering stones as a young boy watch with interest at Ankpa site.

we feed our families, pay our children's school fees and even take care of our parents. The job is risky and that is how life is but in the absence of any other job, it is better to dig than go and steal," Agada added.

Like Agada most other young men at the site told *Daily Trust* that they chose to be digging rather than stealing. They narrated a terrifyingly chilling story of how they were having a busy day filling tippers and other vehicles that had come to buy the sand and all of a sudden they heard a sound and before they knew what was happening, the wall of the hole they were in came tumbling down and about three of the young men

were buried alive, along with the tipper they were loading. It took the entire crowd of diggers three days of hard work to locate the tipper and get out the remains of their colleagues.

At Ankpa, the situation is not as dangerous when compared to what obtains in Otukpa. At Ankpa the population of those engaged in the business is mostly women and their children who have to abandon school to assist their mothers in their daily effort to provide for the family.

Mrs Hawa Usman, one of the women involved in the digging told *Daily Trust* that she has been in the business for over 10 years and that she was able to train her children in school up

to polytechnic level with money she made from selling sand.

"I have been doing this tedious work for more than 10 years and it has helped me provide for my children. With the money I make from here I have been able to send my children to College of Education and polytechnic," she said.

Usman noted that there was nothing dangerous about sand excavation nor did it affect the environment as, according to her, there exist a mass of land that has never been put to use. "If we continue to dig from now till 10 years that will not change the way the environment is, government should provide us and our children with jobs so that we can

leave sand excavation."

Another woman, known as Jane said she started the sand digging business after her husband died and left her with six children that she has had to fend for.

"Since I started this business I stopped going around looking for how to feed my children and also pay their school fees. I don't have to look for money to invest here, your strength will determine what you get and am not lazy," Jane added.

According to the women, they gather the sand into tipper load heaps and people come to buy for between N3,000 and N5,000.

Isa, a child aged six working at the site in Ankpa told *Daily Trust* that he is there working for himself. "Am digging here to get money for my school fees and books, my mother alone cannot do everything for me, I have to help her."

Like Isa, so many other young boys are engaged in the digging and this development, according to medical experts, is not conducive for their health.

Dr Jacob Odeh, a general medical practitioner said exposing children to such activities is dangerous to their health as most of them develop tuberculosis and other lungs diseases before they become adults.

"The most painful aspect of this unnecessary exposure is that, the children develop the habit of taking dangerous drugs, smoking hard drugs and hemp as a way of getting energy or boosting their morale to do the digging and before you know it they are down with one ailment or the other," Odeh said.



■ A tipper loading sand at one of the sites in Olachagbaha, Otukpa.