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Water travel in Nigeria, another unnoticed mass killer

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People travelling by boat recently.

Whereas it ought to be fun when anyone travels on water whether by speed or flying boat or ship yet it has rather gradually become one unchecked route where increasing number of people end their lives.

Particularly worrisome in many parts of South South Nigeria where there is preponderance of body of waters, including streams, rivers and ocean

are the cases of children who paddle canoes all alone in big, dreadful waters sometimes in the dead of night. Oftentimes, the varied dangers they are exposed to overwhelm them, especially as they wear no life jackets.

Even vulnerable pregnant women who eke out a living from the waters continue to be consumed by it.

Many die unconsciously in the waters through careless mistakes, others through overloading of boats, many others as a result of defects in the boats, high tide, pirate attacks, unexplainable and countless natural and unnatural causes.

Sadly, a lot of these Nigerians and other nationals that meet their untimely deaths in the waters wore no life jackets because there seems to be no government policy to regulate and enforce it for travelling on water.

Last year, a large number of seafarers, some of them foreign nationals who preferred to travel on cheap wooden boat from Oron in Akwa Ibom State through the Calabar waterways to Cameroon and Gabon were challenged by troubled waters and attacked by pirates while at high sea. They were all killed.

The high tide ripped the wooden boat apart and out of the 100 or so passengers, only three were rescued alive two days or so after by Marine and Naval security operatives. None had any life jackets which could have saved lives.

In Calabar, a couple of months ago, there were a number of boat mishaps and boat passengers travelling from Calabar beach to Creek Town in Odukpani LGA, a journey of less than 20 minutes on speed boat, were reported to have capsized and local

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fishermen could only rescue a few.

A dock worker at the National Inland Water Agency (NIWA) premises, 35-year-old Mrs Angela Aniudo, said between last year and now she has witnessed how, at least, 10 persons have died by unknowingly walking straight into the deep water when it rose beyond normal level in the night; they had thought they were at the edge of the platform.

Notwithstanding these and other risks associated with water travel, no seafarer is interested in taking precautions.

Just for profit, owners and operators of ships take delight in overloading the rickety and ramshackle ships, despite warnings by water authorities.

It's like they know little or nothing about protective gear for themselves and passengers as they show no interest in encouraging themselves and passengers to guard themselves with something that can keep them afloat if there was danger of shipwreck at sea or their boat capsized.

To arrest the ugly situation, NIWA in conjunction with a firm of emergency planners, Enviroplus Associates Ltd, is stepping up enforcement of wearing life jackets by sea passengers, dock workers boats drivers, etc.

They are also going round the country forming The National Waterway Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit to create awareness about water safety and rescue.

Working with the slogan, 'No Life Jacket, No Water Travel', they have formed Marine Safety Marshals (MSM). Area manager of NIWA Engr Rufus Oladimeji Ogbonlata said the MSM will be like the Federal Road Safety Corps marshals.

Those to form the MSM will essentially be volunteers, fishermen, residents of riverine communities, divers, dock workers and will be tasked to help manage water safety standards, report and rescue boat mishaps.

Mr Olubanke Omokivie who is the project coordinator of Enviroplus said in Calabar during a sensitisation workshop on the formation of MSM that government will sustain the funding, provide sophisticated communication gadgets for the MSM to alert NIWA for immediate rescue missions. He charged seafarers to always raise alarm once they noticed overloading.

He said the wearing of life jackets would be resolutely enforced and offenders would be arrested by the MSM and marine police.

Ogbonlata emphasised that no one, even children, shall be allowed to embark on sea journey without wearing life jackets.

He said the unit will teach and encourage ship owners, seafarers and dock workers on compulsory wearing of life jackets while travelling by sea, and also complement Marine Police by arresting defaulters.

He said government will invest much on the marshals so that they can be able to play the role of saving lives of Nigerians whose businesses are at sea.

"The federal government is much concerned with the avoidable but increasing number of Nigerians and other nationals dying while travelling by sea. For this reason, people are to be trained to become Marine Safety Marshals.

"Their work will essentially be to report about any boat mishaps, attack of passenger boats by sea robbers, overloading of ships and boats which make it riskier to set out to sea.

"Their alarm through special communications gadgets which will be given to them will immediately alert all neighbouring and NIWA headquarters for immediate response," he said.

A retired marine worker, Engr Donald Oko and a marine agent, Mazi Charles Okoroafor said NIWA should engage those with water experience as MSM, and that ship owners must be forced to comply with international best practices.

"There is need to enforce sea enlightenment. Passengers must be made to be conscious of safety standards so that they too can help themselves during crisis at sea. Importantly, ship owners must ensure that they have on board life jackets for their passengers," Okoroafor stressed.

Stakeholders commended the government initiative but stressed importance of standardisation of boats and sea-going ships to withstand sea rage and the 'notorious boys'.

"We would need the marine safety marshals to parade the waters ceaselessly to repel the sea criminals and check boat owners. Communication is also vital as the MSM initiative is commissioned", a senior dock worker, Effiong Michael, stressed.

But a fisherman, 65-year-old Nyong Emmanuel lamented that bigger ships harass and do not allow them to operate. But officials of NIWA cautioned the local fishermen to steer clear off navigable routes meant for big ships.

Akapo Adeboye from NIWA headquarters appealed to water stakeholders not to further endanger lives of fellow nationals through excessive quest to make money not minding state of their crafts, or encouraging the usage of life jackets.

Attendees commended the formation of the national water emergency preparedness initiative as well as introduction of marine safety marshals, hoping that these would be sustained as a way of curtailing boat mishaps and incessant loss of lives at the nation's waterways.

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