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In Port Harcourt, boating around eases traffic woes

By Victor Edozie, Port Harcourt | Publish Date: Aug 27 2016 5:00AM

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It is not unusual to be ferried by boat but hundreds of Rumuolumeni residents in Obio Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State have adopted the use of wooden boats as a strategy to overcome the present difficult economic realities in the country and avoid the stressful traffic gridlock.

But, apart from using the wooden boat as a survival strategy and costing costs, passengers put their lives on line. Located at the Eagle Island axis of Port Harcourt, the canal is a melting point for all kinds of criminality. It has become notorious for kidnappers and criminals who use it as an escape route to escape with their victims.

Infact, two years ago, heavily armed robbers invaded Agip Oil Company through the canal. The robbers, according to witnesses, came in three speed boats and anchored at Eagle Island jetty. While some members of the gang mounted guard at the entrance of the jetty ostensibly to wade off any intruder, others invaded the company, overwhelmed the security guards and carted away huge sums of money. The robbery gang made away with their loot through the canal unchallenged.

Besides, the narrowness of the canal has also given room for frequent boat mishaps.

Ferrying through the canal has also reduced long hours spent on Iwofe-Rumuelumeni road. A journey to Rumuelumeni through Iwofe road takes as much as two hours while that of the canal takes less than twenty minutes.

On December 12, 2012, 40 residents including a pregnant woman lost their lives in a boat mishap when a 20-sitter wooden engine boat capsized in the canal. However, three persons were rescued.

The incident elicited disenchantment among residents of the state who berated the then government for failure to reconstruct the collapsed Iwofe-Rumuelumeni road.

The canal connects Rumulumeni community from Eagle Island and sandwiched between Rumuelumeni and Kalabari axis of the state and through Bonny Island and Sombrairo River.

A boat trip to Rumulumeni starts from the Eagle Island jetty. There are about five jetties located at different sections of the Island. The jetties are controlled by the community leaders through their representatives. Boat operators pay a toll fee of N100 to the community on each trip while passengers pay N50.

It is really chaotic when Daily Trust visited one of the jetties as operators scramble for passengers to maximize profit. Mostly do not really worry about the comfort of the passengers but to woo commuters to their boats.



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They simply hauled into the boat and the journey commenced.

In less than five minutes, a particular boat is filled with passengers and a heart-wrenching trip through the canal begins. The passengers are not provided with any safety gears in case of emergency.

It was gathered that a boat operator can earn between N15, 000 to N30, 000 daily depending on human traffic at the jetty.

A boat operator, Silver Slyvanus told Daily Trust that he started the business in 2010 because of the difficulties residents of the area encountered on daily transiting to work.

He said the long period of time spent on Whimp-lwofe road as well as its high transport fare, are some of the reasons why passengers prefer using the canal as an alternative route.

“Residents needed a shortcut to get to their homes on time and also save a little money. That is why they prefer the boats. It does not cost much,” he stated.

Asked how they make their money, Slyvanus retorted that God has been helping them and it’s a very good business noting that traffic is huge.

He added “The number of boats we have is not enough to contend with inflow of human traffic here. People flocked here on a daily to board our boats.”

But the joy of Slyvanus in making huge profit is the agony of Peter Johnson, a resident of Rumuelumeni who ferried through the canal daily to go to work. John’s office is located at Eagle Island. He expressed his distaste for the canal but has no choice hence that was the fastest route to his office.

“I have found this canal a necessary evil simply because that is the shortest route to come to work. To ply the lwofe road to is not an easy joke. It will take a lot of time and money to do that because of the long stretch of the road. So the circumstances beyond my control have forced me to ply a route that is so endangered,” John lamented.

According to him, “I lost a relation in this canal in 2012 when a boat to Rumulumeni capsized. More than forty persons lost their lives in that particular incident. Apart from a relation, three persons were affected in my village.”

For Beatrice, it is the fear of kidnappers and armed robbers along the route. She recalled an encounter with gunmen suspected to be kidnapper along the canal.

“It was on a Saturday evening when I was coming back from a church service in Port Harcourt. Our boat took off at exactly 5.30pm and mid-way into our journey, I noticed that two boats were fast following us. I thought it was an ordinary passenger boat that normally plies the canal until we started hearing gunshots,” she stated.

According to her, it was later discovered that it was armed robbers who had attacked residents of Eagle Island and were making escape with their loot.

She said: “Their gunshots jolted me just like other passengers in the boat.

We would have been hit with strain bullet because the robbers were

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shooting sporadically.”

After that incident Beatrice took a decision never to embark on a canal journey but later rescinded because she has no other alternative.

A resident of the area, Emeka Amaefula, however commended Governor Wike for completing the second phase of the Iwofe-Rumulumeni road saying that it has lessen the plight of commuters.

He attributed the huge human traffic at the Jetty to the long stretch of Rumuelumeni road and called on the state government to construct more roads to open up the area.

Rumuelumeni is a fast developing community that has high presence of multi-national companies. The Nigerian naval shipyard as well as the Rivers State-own Ignatius Ajuru University is located in the area.



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