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Tragedy in Tegna

By Ahmed Tahir Ajobe, Minna | Publish Date: Dec 14 2016 2:00AM

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Some of the torched houses

The sharp bend on the ever-busy Kaduna-Lagos Trunk A road, just a metre away from the Tegna-Minna junction in Tegna town has become a nightmare to the residents of the ancient city. Accidents involving trucks and articulated vehicles have long become permanent features residents have come to dread overtime, but must have to live with.

Statistics of the deaths and destruction owing to such crashes mount each year. A few metres away from the popular junction, towards the Kaduna axis of the road lies a carcass of a fuel tanker from one of the deadliest crashes ever recorded in the town. Behind the fallen truck were the remains of several residential houses and

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shops ravaged from the fire fuelled by the inflammable content the ill-fated tanker spilled when it crashed penultimate Friday.

Just a stretch away is the site of the grave where the charred remains of most of the victims were interred together. Officials of the Niger State Emergency Agency (NSEMA) and the chairman of Rafi local government area, Alhaji Garba Tanko Kangara confirmed that they supervised the mass burial of 14 persons after the incident. Since the mass burial, the death toll has been on the rise, with four among the 7 with severe burns dying later that day, including 11 year-old Khadijat Bala.

So it was indeed a 'Black Friday' for Tegna and its inhabitants and the town was in deep mourning when *Daily Trust* visited last Thursday. Each of the eight households which lost a dear one was a mourning point from Pa David Ola Ojo to Hassana Malam Tegna. Pa Ola-Ojo died alongside Alice, his wife of many years, in the ensuing fire.

The tanker bearing the deadly consignment fell in front of their residence. The driver was said to have dodged a pothole after negotiating the sharp bend and veered off the road. But veering back to the highway became impossible because of the impediment caused by the shoulder of the road. The tanker's heavy content tilted, forcing the truck to crash on its side and spilling the highly inflammable premium motor-spirit.

The crash attracted the residents of the sleepy community to the scene, unsuspecting the imminent danger at hand. Apparently aware of the impending calamity, the driver and his conductor crossed to a safe point at the other side of the road, from where they shouted for the residents to flee from the scene.

It was early in the morning, and many were preparing breakfast. Minutes later there was a fireball with smoldering flames in all directions that the fuel spilled. The consequence was spontaneous. Pa Ola-Ojo and his wife had just returned from their morning prayers at a nearby church, and were about having their breakfast with some members who accompanied them to the residence, when the crash occurred. They made to see what the commotion was, but could only reach the gate before the raging flames trapped them. Their remains were to be evacuated later and interred with others in the mass grave.

At Tegna, Felicia, one of the Ola-Ojos' children who is a staff of the state ministry of information, culture and tourism, told our correspondent that because of the recurring accidents on the ever-busy highway and the closeness of their residence to the road, the family decided to build an apartment at a distance to relocate their parents. The effort was at the roofing stage, but was also affected by the incident.

Kehinde was summoned to Tegna that fateful Friday only to receive the news of his parents' shocking departure. She never bid a proper farewell to them.

Three blocks from the Ojo-Ola's family house where the relatives gathered to mourn them, Hassana Malam Tegna stared vacantly into space oblivious of the crowd of sympathizers that have come to commiserate with her. There were no more tears to shed for her three children-Adamu, Ibrahim and Aisha - consumed by fire a day earlier.

Relations said she has been like that after a botched attempt to take her life, on realizing that her three kids will never return home to her. To her, the pain of the loss will forever linger; but so is the sorrow over the demise of Umma-Salma and Abdulrahman Haliu, both of the same parents as well as Kamaldeen and Ayuba Alfa. Both of them were in the house when the accident happened.

On the spur of the moment, their mother, Khadijat Alfa, ran to safety but retraced her steps when it occurred to her that her two children were in the house and rushed back to rescue them. She never got to the house when the ensuing inferno nearly consumed her, while her two kids died in the incident. Ayuba was just six months old and was still breastfeeding.

Khadijat herself also passed on from severe burns last Wednesday. *Daily Trust* learnt that most of those who died were trying to rescue others. An eyewitness, Hussaini Bala said among such unlucky rescuers was the Principal of Maikujerih Day Secondary School, Mohammed Saleh Mohammed, 48 who was watering some blocks molded for him a day earlier.

He died trying to rescue a kid; so was Malam Ndagana, a teacher with Attahiru Secondary School, Kagara, who later died from severe burns at the Federal Medical Centre Bida, also in the state. His daughter, Zainab Ndagana however could not make it to the hospital like her father. She was buried alongside others beside the mass grave.

The town and its people were still counting their losses and also burying the dead through Tuesday up till Wednesday with the demise of 17 year-old Shariff Umar, who was initially admitted at the General Hospital Kagara but discharged following the request of his parents. His skin surface was lost in the fire, revealing a pale and white interior as he gasped for breath, while stretched out on a mattress at the family's outer-room. The father Malam Audi Umar, told *Daily Trust* that the family took the decision to effect the discharge when it became apparent that the hospital did not have the wherewithal to sustain him.

However, it was not only Shariff's case that overwhelmed the secondary facility in Kagara but all those with second degree burns. A medical practitioner, Dr. Zelani Abubakar, who runs a private clinic in Minna told *Daily Trust* that with the severe burns and the amount of substance inhaled, none of the patients has a slim chance of survival.

"They would require oxygen machines and sophisticated equipment to enable the substance drain from the system," he explained. The statistic indicates that the toll was higher on the vulnerable-women and children. Eight children between the age of 6 months and 10 died in the unfortunate crash.



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There has been a growing public outcry since the incident probably because of the sheer numbers of the casualties, but such incidents involving tankers bearing consignments of death, were common occurrences on the many Federal highways across the state.

Investigations show that at least 138 people died due to tanker explosions and the consequent fire from 28 crashes across the state between 2013 and early December 2016. The statistic shows that Mokwa local government area leads with 58 deaths, out of which 32 were from a single accident in Kudu in January 25, 2015; followed by Lapai with 30 deaths, out of which 22 was from a single crash in Gidan Zuma on August 6, 2014.

Nine percent of the said accidents were on the many federal roads across the state and attributed to their deplorable condition. This is apart from the many road crashes and consequent deaths and destructions on the said roads.

The state is said to have the highest number of federal roads in the country, 39 in all because of its large landmass. But the seeming advantage has rather brought pain and sorrow to its people because 80 percent of the 2,375 Km roads are in deplorable condition.

Some of these roads include Suleja – Minna road, Lapai – Lambata – Bida road, Bida – Lemu – Zungeru – Tegna road, Gidigori – Kagara – Mokwa road, Makera – Kontagora road, Kontagora – Yawuri road, Kontagora – Rijau road and Agaie – Baro road. Others are Gulu – Muye – Gugu Road; Kontagora – Rijau Road and Mokwa – New Bussa Road. The entire stretch of road from Suleja to Minna down to Mokwa is a write off and nightmare to travellers as well as motorists. So also are others with mini-gullies along all stretches even as the shoulders are washed away.

Mangled vehicles littered the road sides resulting from accidents, which often occurred when the drivers attempted to avoid the gullies. It is more traumatic travelling through those roads during the rainy season. Vehicles break down; heavy-duty trucks overturn or get stuck in the mud. Motorists disembark at such horrible spots to push crippled and articulated vehicles.

Statistics released by the Niger State Command of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) show that about 147 people were killed between January and September this year in 361 road accidents in the state.

The statistics indicate that 361 road accidents were recorded, out of which 74 were fatal, 265 were serious and 22 were minor. He said 915 persons were injured and 147 killed.

The number of road accidents in the first nine months of the year was almost more than that of the whole of 2015. According to the information, 479 road accidents occurred, out of which 115 were fatal, 326 were serious and 40 were minor; 1,256 were injured while 191 were killed.

Irrked by the development, the state government had put pressure on the Federal Government to declare a state of emergency on the roads, while also intervening by rehabilitating some. The Minna-Suleja road took N500 million of the state's tax payers money but its condition worsened, due to traffic by articulated vehicles and trailers.

It also intervened in the rehabilitation of deplorable portions of the federal road around Kagara and others. As the state awaits the much-anticipated interventions to make the roads across the state motorable, the Tegna carnage is expected to be a wakeup call. As it were, the state government would continue to provide the temporary relief to the families of those who lost lives across the nation's highways in the state as it did recently with the release of N28 million for the purpose. But the earlier the federal government replicates the recent gesture of mobilising contractors to sites as it did in respect of the Minna-Suleja road following pressure by the state government, the better.

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