

Niger Tragedy: Kicked Out By Bandits, Killed In Boat Mishap

Among victims are returnees who had earlier fled with their children due to bandit attacks...

Zumba Shiroro waterfront where the people of Tijana in Munya Local Government Area went to purchase firewood before their boat capsized



By Romoke W. Ahmad

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Recently, a boat mishap in Munya Local Government Area of Niger State led to the death of 35 people.

The latest incident, which is one in the series of many boat mishaps in the state and other parts of the country, has brought to fore how lack of enforcement of regulations and flagrant violations of rules by operators on the nation's waterways have led to loss of lives, Daily Trust reports.

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Niger State has in the last few years experienced many boat mishaps which claimed many lives. Most of these mishaps have been largely attributed to the traditional method being used by people living in riverine communities because of poverty and the failure of relevant authorities, particularly, the National Inland Waterways Authority (NIWA) to regulate activities of passenger ferry and boat operators on the waterways.

Overloading of passengers and goods; night voyages by ferry operators; obstructions on waterways; violation of route usage; faulty boat and ferry engines; non usage of life jackets and other life-saving appliances, amongst others are some of the factors responsible for the mishaps.

Experts who spoke to Daily Trust said such incidences would continue unless the mind-set of the locals is changed and relevant authorities take charge of the waterways.

Latest calamity

Last week, 35 people were confirmed dead following a rescue operation by local divers when a boat carrying over 100 people capsized at Tijana in Munya Local Government Area of the state.

Out of the 35 who died, it was learnt that two children could not be rescued despite the effort of the divers and rescue team while the remaining 33 people have been buried.

According to sources in the area, a local boat carrying about 100 people including women and children capsized 10 minutes to their destination in the about 2-hours journey at about 6:30pm on Saturday when the villagers were returning from a local market in Zumba, Shiroro Local Government Area of the state.

The Sarkin Kasuwa (Head of the Market) in Zumba, Malam Adamu Ahmed, who spoke to *Daily Trust Saturday*, disclosed that 30 bodies have been recovered so far since the search and rescue operation started.

He explained that the local divers are still intensifying search for more bodies even as he said that lack of support in the area of logistics from any quarter slowed down their search operation.

The boat, which is said to be six months old, capsized due to a heavy windstorm caused by Saturday's evening rain in the area.

Among the victims were some returnees who had earlier fled their homes with their children due to bandit attacks.

Adamu said, "Some of the victims were going back to the village to get some food items and return back to Zumba where they were taking refuge as a result of bandits' activities in the affected communities."

The victims were from about seven communities, all in Munya Local Government Area where armed bandits have intensified their attacks on the people.

The Chairman of boat operator in the area, Malam Sahle Alsam (Sarkin Girigi), while narrating what happened, said the mishap occurred because the boat hit a log of wood in the river, causing some of the firewood in the boat to fall into the river and then water entered the boat.

"The boat was carrying 105 people with some firewood but along the line, it hit a tree trunk and water started entering the boat before it capsized. 35 people died while 70 people including the two drivers survived," Alsam said.



Niger state government officials during a condolence visit to the family of those who lost their families

Victims recount ordeals

Some family members of those who lost their lives in the mishap while speaking with our correspondent, described it as unfortunate, saying the victims were almost at their destination before the incident.

Daily Trust Saturday learnt that a man lost 6 members of his family to the mishap.

ASP Mamman Sarki who lost six members of his family said they cannot question God, adding that it was the will of God for the people to die that way.

He said it was pathetic that the victims were running from bandits when they died in the boat mishap.

"We lost six of our family members; three men and three women who ran away from their community because of bandits," he said.

Another woman who gave her name as Hauwa said she lost a brother in the tragedy.

"He was the breadwinner of the family...He died at a time the family needed him most. We pray God will take care of all of us. We also hope that the people that are missing would be found for their families to have peace."

A female trader said some families would never recover. "They lost those feeding them and the fortune they have after working for so many years."

Yusuf Aliyu, who trained sailor at the Maritime Academy, Oron, Akwa Ibom State, said boat mishaps would continue in Niger and other states until the sector is completely reformed.

"Our people are still using the archaic method of water transportation which ought to be a safe method for the poor in a country like Nigeria.

"Governments at the state and national levels must revolutionize the sector by purchasing modern boats. They can give them to cooperatives or manage them the way they are managing mass transit services.

"For now, it is only Lagos and one or two states in the South that are serious about water transportation. It is an area that we can harness even in the North to improve the livelihood of our people," he said.

"Violation of safety rules responsible"

The National Inland Waterways Authority (NIWA) said it will investigate the immediate and remote causes of the recent boat mishap.

NIWA's Managing Director, Dr George Moghalu, in a statement made available to *Daily Trust Saturday* by the Authority's General Manager Corporate Affairs, Jibril Darda'u, expressed worries over loss of lives in boat mishaps, which he blamed on disregard for laid down safety regulations by ferry and boat operators as well as passengers.

"The authority is particularly pained by the unwarranted loss of lives and property due to disregard for established rules and regulations guiding passenger ferry operations in the country.

"For safety reasons, night sailing is banned; the use of life jackets and other life saving appliances is mandatory, even as overloading of boats is a criminal offence.

"Yet, boat skippers and crew are fond of flouting these rules. Nevertheless, NIWA will continue to engage in aggressive enlightenment and education of ferry operators and passengers alike," he said.

NIWA, while commiserating with families of passengers who lost their lives in the mishap, urged boat and ferry operators to abide by all safety requirements to avoid recurrence of such mishap in the future.

Speaking on the incident, the Niger/Kwara Area Manager of NIWA, Mr Akapo Adeboye, during an interview with our correspondent, explained that the out board engine driven boat left Zumba in Shiroro Local Government Area of the state after the close of the local market day and was en route Tiger, a riverine community in Munya Local Government Area of the state when the incident happened.



Families of some victims being consoled

"The boat lost track and hit a snag inside the water. The cause of the accident was actually attributed to the following; overloading of the boat as there were almost 100 passengers onboard. The negligence of the boat operator and the lack of any safety equipment or device on the boat," he said.

Oyedepo also explained that when the authority engaged the boat operators on number of passengers on the boat, it learnt that the exact number of passengers could not be ascertained, as there was no passenger manifest.

Oyedepo, however, said that boat operators have refused to obey rules and regulations of the authority despite all the sensitization carried out for them.

According to him, "We have educated and enlightened them on the danger in not following all the laid down regulations. Most of the time, they carry overload; they

indulge in over speeding while life saving equipment like life jackets which we gave them for free are not always used while traveling on water.”

He also explained that the majority of the people in the riverine areas believed that because they are fishermen, they can swim very well, thus, they refuse to use the life jacket and follow all the safety rules.

The area manager however said that the mishap was not as a result of overloading but because the boat hit a tree trunk or a rock.

He said in view of the incident, NIWA would see to the possibility of embarking on maintenance dredging in the area to clean the water ways of obstructions.

According to him, the operators never complained to the authority about the presence of any obstructions on their routes, which he said would have spurred them into action.

On the growth in the river, he explained that the authority has been campaigning against open defecation and pollution of the water with refuse, adding that it was such actions that usually give nutrients to water which allow tree trunks to grow bigger in the water.

Akapo also noted that there are different channels on the waterways which include primary, secondary and tertiary channels, adding that boats are only expected to follow the primary channel.

He, however, observed that some of the operators cut corners by not using the primary routes and instead follow shortcuts which may be either secondary or tertiary channels that are not meant for them.

In all, he said proper investigation will be carried out on the incident before they can come up with the exact cause of the mishap.

He therefore appealed to the residents of the state to keep the waterways clean and desist from dumping of refuse into the river.

Niger govt to intervene

The Director-General of the Niger State Emergency Management Agency (NSEMA), Malam Ahmed Inga, when contacted, said the state was taking indices of places where they use boats for transport in order to regulate the activities of the operators to avoid future occurrence of such mishap.

He pointed out that the state government was working towards putting in place a regulatory framework to check activities of boat operators and address the hurdles that hamper their activities.

Inga also disclosed that the government was considering the possibility of providing life jackets in a bid to reduce the high casualties often recorded during such accidents either for free or at a subsidized rate.

Another issue of concern raised by Inga is the age of some of the boats.

He said some of the boats plying the waterways are old while the owners find it difficult to replace them because of the economic situation of the country, adding that as an agency, the operators have been advised to reduce the number of passengers they ferry with such boats until they are able to get a new one.

Also, the Senator representing Niger East Senatorial District and Chairman Senate Committee on Senate Services, Senator Mohammed Sani Musa has donated two modern passenger boats to riverine communities in Munya Local Government area of the state following the boat mishap.

The Senator announced this while delivering his Sallah message in Minna where he commiserated with families of victims.

The 32-seater boats, which are equipped with modern facilities, are aimed at reducing the rate of boat mishaps usually recorded in those communities.

Timeline of Niger boat mishaps

Niger State, over the last four years, has witnessed various boat mishaps as no fewer than 80 lives were lost.

On October 5, 2017, at least 22 persons were confirmed dead while 17 were rescued alive in a boat mishap which occurred while en route Tetebo village of

Niger State.

Locals said the boat was coming from neighbouring Kebbi State when it crashed into a tree trunk inside the heavily flooded river.

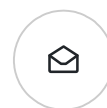
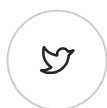
In another incident in 2017, eight people – mostly women and children, died in a boat mishap while returning to Malale from Wara Market in Kebbi on the same route.

In August 2019, at least 15 persons were confirmed dead, while many others went missing in a boat mishap that occurred in Borgu Local Government Area of the state.

The victims of the 2019 mishap were said to be returning from Wara Market at a border community in Ngaski Local Government Area of Kebbi State to Sabo Yumu in Borgu late at night when the accident happened.

The accident was said to have been caused by poor visibility due to bad weather, which made the boat run into a tree stump on River Malale midway into the journey.

boat mishap capsized



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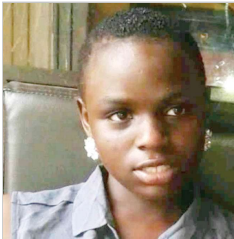
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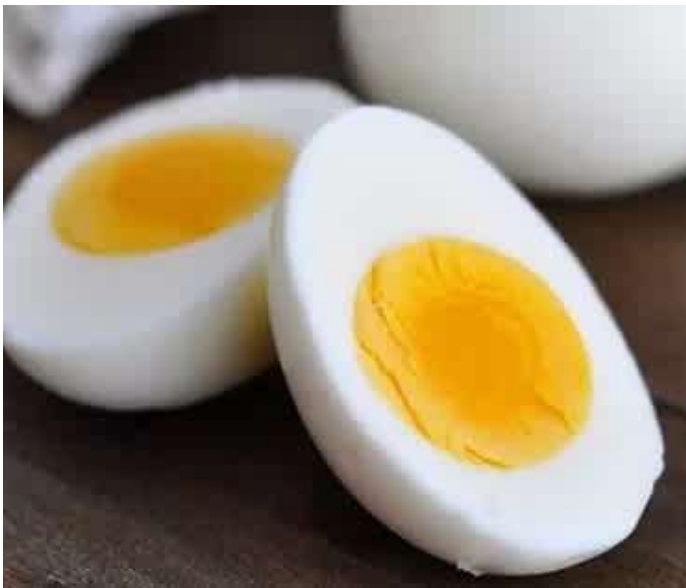
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