

FEATURE

Kwara's bridges of deaths

The death of Sheikh Abdulganiyu Aboto and two of his students at the Sobi/Abattoir bridge highlights similar fatalities on related facilities in the state. *Daily Trust Saturday* chronicles the trend and looks at solutions to the problem.

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1 Last month, Sheikh AbdulGaniyu Aboto and two of his students were killed at the Abattoir bridge along Sobi Road in Ilorin East Local Government of Kwara State after they were swept away by the flood that followed a torrential rain which devastated the metropolis.

Aboto, it was gathered, was coming from a dawah activity in Minna, Niger State, alongside two of his students - Alfa Azeze Omokun and Alfa Nurudeen, when his Toyota Yaris car, got stuck while driving through the flood. Their corpses and the vehicle were discovered a day after the water subsided.

Although their deaths have been attributed to natural disaster beyond the control of the government, it has however revealed a related pattern in similar circumstances in the state with residents and stakeholders raising concerns on the state of bridges in the state.

2 Some years back, *Daily Trust Saturday* reliably gathered that a senior civil servant in the state, one Mr Owolabi, who was husband to late Dr (Mrs) Owolabi of the Faculty of Law, University of Ilorin, died in a similar circumstance during the construction of the Harmony Estate/Akerebiata Bridge.

"In a similar circumstance in the night during a downpour, he had tried to cross the bridge and his car was swept into the river," a staff of the university noted. The National President of the Muslims Lawyers Association of Nigeria (MULAN) and a former Dean of the faculty of Law confirmed the issue.

In June 2020, no fewer than five people were swept away by a heavy downpour when another bridge at Oke-Erin collapsed around 10pm on a Saturday killing three family members, with only one survivor. The occupants were said to be returning home after closing from their shops when tragedy struck.

According to the state fire service, the vehicle had five occupants and "One of them alighted from the vehicle to check the depth of the torrent. But unfortunately, the embankment gave way and the bridge suddenly collapsed and sank. Two other occupants who also alighted from the vehicle sunk with their vehicle falling off the bridge," he noted.

While the body of the deceased father, Mr Okechukwu Orwabor was found at Coca Cola Road, Ilorin, the corpses of



■ A view of a collapsed bridge

Chuben Orwabo and Chibike Orwabo earlier declared missing were recovered six days after by the Fire Service.

In a related development during the previous administration in the state, about 17 occupants of a commercial Toyota Skoda bus with number plate Kwara XA 805 LRN, escaped death by the whiskers on the link road at Akerebiata.

An eyewitness, Mr. Tajudeen Usman, said the flood dragged the vehicle off the road before the passengers quickly alighted.

But a 65-year-old building material merchant, Mr. Kehinde Ajongbobo, was not so lucky as he was swept with his motorcycle into the river at night after the downpour that cut off the link road between Sobi barracks and the adjoining communities around Akerebiata Bridge. One of his relatives, Isa Ajongbobo, had told journalists that a search party that was later organised found the deceased's motorcycle in the river and his corpse about one kilometre away, adding that the deceased had lost his twin brother a few years before the incident.

Earlier this month, residents of Oloje/Ogidi community in Ilorin West Local Government Area lamented the deplorable condition of the bridge serving the community which is on the verge of collapse.

One of them, Mr Kolawole, said that the bridge has been in a state of disrepair for years now, adding that it is worrisome that it is located opposite the Oloje Police station.

According to him, with the present

situation of the bridge and its decrepit state, it is doubtful if it can survive two rainfalls without caving in. "This bridge links motorists to Okoolowo, a very busy corridor. We have recorded destruction of valuable properties and businesses because of the situation without any tangible effort to address the situation and save the resident from imminent danger or is it after we have started recording casualties that it will be repaired or reconstructed?" He added.

The publicity secretary of the Kwara Butchers Association, Oba Elegede, where the bridge that claimed the life of the late Sheikh Aboto is located, said the facility has recorded several deaths that have not been documented.

"Apart from the death of Sheikh Aboto and two of his students recently, we have had more than five instances of fatalities on this bridge, as well as several vehicles and motorcycles that have been swept away.

"One very disturbing concern is that the road is not only narrow compared to the volume of the vehicles plying it, it is equally difficult for those not used to the road to know that a bridge is there because the flood covers it. Even when there is no rain, except those who are conversant with the terrain, any motorists can easily fall inside the bridge while driving especially at night because there's no indication whatsoever that a bridge is there or steel railings/structure to suspend any vehicle and/or which people can use as support when there is a flood situation.

"Apart from the faulty construction, the bridge itself needs reconstruction and expansion. We cannot say we don't want rain, but that bridge has become a danger zone for everybody, especially those unaware of the deadly situation we have here. There is the need for serious and urgent work to be done there. It has consumed several lives in the past. It's Sheikh Aboto's status that attracted media attention this time around," he added.

Government position

While inspecting the Oke-Erin tragedy, the Kwara State Deputy Governor, Mr Kayode Alabi, who mourned the victims, had described the accident as disheartening, tragic and traumatic. He urged the people to desist from dumping refuse in drainages or building on waterways to prevent flooding or erosion of bridges.

Similarly in sympathizing with the victims of the recent incidents, the government cautioned residents against indiscriminate refuse dump in drainages. In a statement jointly signed by the Commissioners of Environment and her counterparts in Works and Transport, Mrs Remilekun Banigbe and Rotimi Iliyasu respectively, the government said different teams of experts and administrators from the ministries have visited the various areas affected.

"While the government is already taking steps to attend to the Akerebiata bridge that partially caved in as a result of the downpour, we appeal to citizens to desist from indiscriminate dumping of refuse in drainages and all waterways. Similarly, some people who had long built houses on waterways are another major reason this is happening."

"Apart from the obvious increase in rainfalls nationwide owing to climate change, incessant dumping of waste in our drainages remains a major reason for the flooding, as refuse continues to block free flow of water. No matter how many drainages the government constructs and the number of times such drainages are desilted, continuous indiscriminate of refuse will always subject everyone to avoidable losses, hardship and embarrassment as we have seen over time," they added.

Expert angle

While speaking with *Daily Trust Saturday*, a senior civil engineer in the state, Engr Bashir Atunde Lawal, said there is the need to prioritize maintenance schedule and proper inspection of the bridges.

"Where we are here, we don't value nature or prepare for it. We have been warned that the volume of the rain will be much this year and most of the bridges we have in the state should have been inspected at the beginning and after the rain to fix any observed defects because bridges also have life spans that are affected by human activities. We don't need to wait until there is a failure."

The engineer said there is no proper design in most of the hydraulic structures which have come of age. He noted that "the Abattoir bridge (where Aboto and the students died) is over 60 years old.

"Sometimes, even if the structures are intact, the runoff could overflow it because of the current perpendicular to the flow of traffic and when there is water, the friction between the vehicle tyres and the road is reduced (lubricated) and any little incident will drift the vehicle towards the hydraulic structures (bridge).

"The only thing that would have been advantageous is to have the handrail which would have served as a kind of buffer if the water tract is not more than the rail can take. But the best thing is to change our attitude towards maintenance. Most of these structures should have been reinforced (steelled) by now," he added.



■ Scene of the Oke-Erin collapsed bridge at the time of the incident



■ Damaged portion of Harmony Estate/Akerebiata bridge