

Pains, as NURTW, LASTMA squabble deepens



THE face-off between National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) and Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) deepened yesterday in Lagos, leaving many commuters stranded at bus stops.

The crises, which started in Maryland and Ojota areas of Lagos, yesterday, extended to other parts of Lagos metropolis with NURTW withdrawing its members from the road. To ensure compliance with the withdrawal order, the union positioned some members at strategic bus stops along most expressways who stopped and vandalised commuter vehicles seen on the road.

Some bus stops on Apapa-Mile Two-Oshodi Expressway were littered with shattered windscreen and other vehicle accessories. Some motorists attached green leaves on their vehicles as a sign of solidarity.

Commuters had difficult times getting to their destinations as many motorists obeyed the order and stayed away from the road. At various bus stops, stranded commuters were seen struggling to board any on-coming vehicle.

For fear of being caught on the road, many motorists decided to take short distance trips. Some of them who were heading to Mile Two from Oshodi had to turn at Toyota Bus Stop to pick passengers back to Oshodi.

Few motorists who plied the road increased fare by between 50 and 100 percent. For instance, cost for a short distance trip from 7/8 Bus Stop on Murtala Mohammed International Airport Road to Oshodi rose from N20 to N30, even N40 in some cases.

It moved from N20 to N100 from Cele Bus Stop to Oshodi and as high as N200 from Oshodi to Wharf, up from N70.

A commuter, Mr. Ladi Nelson said he had difficult times in getting his office. "I live in Okota area of Isolo and before I could get a vehicle to my office, I stood at Cele Bus Stop for three hours. The vehicle that I boarded was not painted the Lagos colour that is why they did not disturb the driver. Normally the transport fare from Cele to Oshodi is N20 but the driver collected N100," he said.

Some of the motorists had to divert operation to residential areas, cutting off the expressways. A commuter, for instance, said the vehicle he boarded

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passed through Ijesha and Ilasa to get to the expressway at Ilas Bus Stop.

Motorcycle operators had a field day. Many of them carried two to three passengers at a time and competed with motorists even on the expressways. They charged even higher fares.

Many commuters lamented the exorbitant increase in fares. One Mr. Lekan Ola whose office is located around Toyota on Mile Two road said, on getting to the garage where he normally boarded vehicles he saw an unusual crowd of people while no vehicle was forthcoming. "At the garage, only two vehicles bearing green leaves were available. The driver offered to carry passengers on the condition that we would pay N100 instead of the normal N50," he said.

Many who could not get vehicles at Oshodi resorted to trekking.

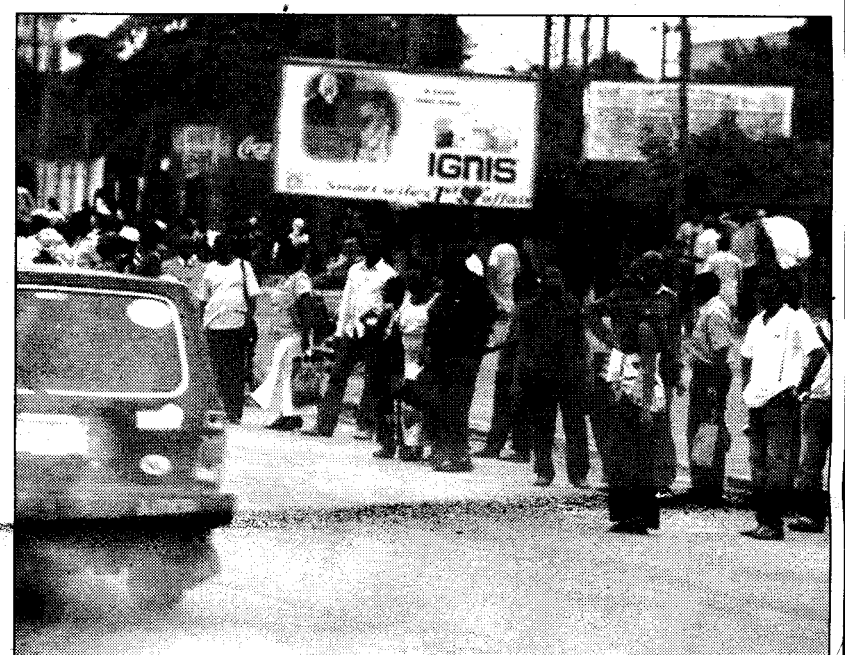
Miss Nonye Emele who resides at Ijesha bemoaned the sharp change in the transport fare. "You cannot imagine me paying N100 from Ijesha to Toyota Bus Stop. I don't know where we are really going in this country. Problem today, problem tomorrow and masses are always at the receiving end," she lamented.

Another worker around Isolo area, Chichi Nma also coming from Ijesha berated those behind the disturbances causing the hardships.

"I had no alternative than to part with N120 for a journey of N20. Things cannot continue to be like this. We call on the government to put in place measures that will forestall this kind of unexpected hardships," Chichi said.

Following clashes between LASTMA officials and commercial bus operators at Ojota, Lagos last Friday and on Monday, bus operators and street urchins popularly known as *area boys* have vowed to get LASTMA officials out of the highways.

Lagosians who plied the Obalende axis and residents of the area were thrown into panic yesterday as the crisis took a dangerous turn. Hoodlums took to the streets and car parks in search of LASTMA officials. They displayed dangerous weapons such as cutlasses, broken bottles, clubs and spears. The smoked and



• Stranded commuters at Oshodi Bus stop yesterday.

PHOTOS Paul Oloko and Precious Otu

drank to stupor sang refrains such as 'No more LASTMA in Lagos, enough of LASTMA killings, any LASTMA official caught should be killed' and others.

People were forced to clear off the road while commuter buses plying Obalende routes refused to make another trip. Many working in Obalende, Ikoyi and Victoria Island trekked to their various offices.

Although no casualty was recorded during the fracas as most LASTMA officials had withdrawn from the roads, some others had to change their wears to mufti to avoid being attacked by the hoodlums.

While commuters recounted their ordeal yesterday due to the crisis, traders at Obalende also narrated their harrowing experiences and the losses they keep incurring. A trader, Tade Olugbogi lamented that touts looted most of her goods yesterday when the crisis started. "While I was running for safety with my 10 months old baby, I could not pack some of my goods and before I came back most of them had been stolen," she said.

A LASTMA official told *The Guardian*

that the allegation against them was that one of their staff was alleged to have killed a bus conductor which they are yet to prove by presenting the corpse of the deceased to government.

He lamented that several of their staff have sustained various degrees of injuries since the crisis started last week, adding that the worst part of it is that some of the hoodlums have vowed to carry the war to the homes of LASTMA staffers. "I do not stay or sleep at home any longer for fear of being attacked," he said.

However, a civil servant, Jamiu Ajimoh said the incessant crisis might not be unconnected with the recent ban on commercial motorcycles at night by the government. "Perhaps because of the anger of the recent ban on commercial motorcycle operators by government and the alleged killing of a bus conductor by a LASTMA official, the hoodlums might have decided to vent their anger on government traffic officials," he added.

Olugbogi pleaded with governor Bola Tinubu to intervene in the matter and resolve it as quick as possible.