

Dockworkers protest colleagues' death, paralyse ports

ACTIVITIES at the Tin Can Island Port were paralysed yesterday after the dockworkers decided to down tools at the terminals. They were protesting the death on Sunday of two of their colleagues in an accident at one of the terminals.

The victims, Benjamin Omowu and Abdullahi Zaki, were said to have slept on top of a container belonging to one of the shipping companies in Terminal 7, on Sunday morning when the operator of a crane discharging containers from a ship unknowingly hit them. They died from the injuries sustained.

The dockworkers, in their hundreds, were also protesting the poor conditions of service they were being subjected to at the terminals and the failure of the Federal Government to agree on a favourable amount to be paid to each of them as the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) disengages its employees.

Though the protest was brought under control by a combined team of Port police and NPA security-men, the strike paralysed loading and off-loading activities for the better part of yesterday.

The dockworkers said they could no longer continue to be placed in a situation where they do not know what becomes of them over their severance package. They said government is foot dragging on their welfare while they are being used as slaves in the ports.

"Our situation can be likened to the African slaves who were stolen from

By Ozioruva Aliu

Africa to Europe and America by the Portuguese; they were made to work in plantations, yet they could not eat out of the produce from the farms. We are doing the odd jobs in the ports, which are vital to port operations. Yet we don't get anything for it, we are not being treated well, we are not being kited well, yet the government is not ready to give us a befitting package as disengagement allowance", Organising Secretary of the dockworkers union, Tin Can Island Branch, Pius Ifah said.

"We are tired of this nonsense. Whatever they want to pay us, let them do, instead of keeping us waiting endlessly. Now, we have lost two of our colleagues without any dime from the Federal Government, yet, we work like machines with poor remuneration since we are regarded as casuals," another dockworker told *The Guardian*.

A senior employee at the port's Public Affairs Department confirmed the protest, but said he was not in the best position to comment on the issue as the head of the unit was not available for comments.

However, owners of Berth 7, where the accident occurred, Ports and Cargo Handling Services Limited - a subsidiary of Sifax Group Nigeria Limited - said they were already meeting with the management of the NPA, labour union leaders and the owners of the vessel to work out compensations for the deceased.