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Sun sets for 10 in night fire

- A Tuesday night petrol accident kills 10, destroys vehicles
By Regina Akpabio, Seye Olumide and Isaac Taiwo

THE evening was giving way to night and the vehicular congestion on Funsho Williams Avenue had thinned out.

From the balcony of his third floor apartment, off Razaq Balogun Street, near the National Stadium, Surulere, Lagos, Ben Asalu, a systems analyst gazed out at the few vehicles on the road.

It occurred to him that a few hours earlier, the entire stretch of Funsho Williams Avenue from Ojuelegba to Iponri had been in the grip of a traffic jam. All that was over and the road quite free.

As his mind wandered idly, the skyline to the front of the stadium was suddenly lit up in a bright burst of light, followed by billowing cloud of black smoke.

Shouts and screams floated to him from the distance.

Then there was an explosion, and more fires and smoke.

As he hurriedly dressed to go out and see

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what the matter was all about, he could not help thanking Providence that whatever it was, did not take place during those hours Funsho Williams Avenue is choked up with vehicles.

What he saw made him throw up and vomit as if his stomach would empty itself.

A 33,000-litre capacity fuel tanker coming from Ijora and headed towards Ojuelegba, lost control, veered out of the major road, and crashed into several cars before it burst into flames.

Many vehicles and their occupants coming behind the tanker, which was leaking profusely, were burnt beyond recognition following a spark that set off a raging fire.

Passers-by were also caught in the fire as thick, blinding smoke held them hostage, preventing them from escaping.

When The Guardian visited the scene of the incident yesterday morning, there were charred remains of the victims and vehicles, including a motorcycle whose rider was blamed for starting the fire.

According to a witness, Ojiugo Olua, a Nollywood Stills Photographer, the tanker driver was coming from the Costain area, descending the flyover at the Stadium when suddenly, he saw a motionless car was right before him.

"The driver swerved and in the process, probably lost control and the vehicle fell down discharging the contents on the road,

which spilled many metres of combustible fuel around and along the route".

According to her, the fire did not start immediately, "but when it did, it was all consuming, destroying everything in its path".

One of the sympathisers, Tunde Adebayo said: "The fire was so powerful that most people on the Stadium side of the road were burnt completely.

"A pregnant woman who was many metres away and was leaning on the Stadium fence to shield herself was burnt to death.

"Even the motorcyclist who started his machine when he was advised not to do so because of the fuel that had leaked all over the road, died in the fire.

"A disabled man who was riding home on his special cycle also died in the fire as well", he recalled.

Some people who escaped from the fire said they had to abandon their vehicles and run for their dear lives.

A resident, Moses Ubani who came to look for his vehicle which his brother was driving said: "My brother said he was many metres from the scene but the heat radiating from the fire was such that he had to abandon the car and run away.

"He is okay but the vehicle was half-burnt. Thank God I may still be able to put it to use".

Ubani who returned with a towing vehicle was yet to locate which of the government agencies his vehicle was taken to.

Yesterday, the pungent odour of petrol still enveloped the area. There was also the nauseating stench of burnt flesh from the 10 persons who died in the fire.

Passers-by had to cover their noses with handkerchiefs while passing the area.

The Head, Planing and Design Department of the Ministry of Works, Sabitu Amudah who came to assess the extent of damage said: "The fire was so powerful that it has destroyed most of the government facilities around the area. We have to replace the slabs on the kerb, lighting and others."

Although the bodies and burnt vehicles had been removed in the night, however, the remains of the tanker and the motorcycle that actually caused the explosion were still at the scene while officials of Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) and State Emergency Monitoring Unit (SEMU), were busy controlling the traffic and pouring disinfectant into the gutters and kerbs.

The Zonal Head of LASTMA, Mr. Bakare Olalekan who said he witnessed the accident and the explosion explained to The Guardian that the "tanker may have developed a fault, following which the driver lost control as he was descending from the flyover in front of the National Stadium.

"About six vehicles were damaged as the articulated lorry fell, spilling petrol on the road.

"All vehicle drivers within the vicinity were quickly ordered to switch off their engines to prevent an explosion.

"But unfortunately, a motorcyclist refused, switched on his engine and the whole area erupted suddenly in flames.

"Those standing in the area between the machine and the tanker, about nine of them, were caught up in the exploding fire."

Olalekan described the event as a sad one, which could have been avoided if the motorcyclist had listened.

A trader within the area, Mrs. Joy Onyema lamented that if what she witnessed that night was the power of petrol at work, then it was not advisable for it to be transported during the day when thousands of vehicles are on the road.

Said she: "We should be grateful that the inferno happened in the evening.

"If it were to be during the day when there is heavy movement of vehicles, the situation would have been worse".

No fewer than five Commissioners in the Lagos State government, among them, Dr. Jide Idris of Health; Information and Strategy's Opeyemi Bamidele; Pof. Bamidele Badejo of Transportation; Youth, Sports and Social Development's Prince Adeniji Adele; Special Duties' Dr. Tola

Kasali, and the Special Adviser to the Governor on Transportation, Mr. Kayode Opeifa, were at the scene shortly after the incident.

Bodies of the victims were removed to the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH), Ikeja while LASTMA officials battled with the ensuing traffic problems.

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