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Killed by generator fumes

WITHIN a space of two weeks or so, generator fumes have killed close to 20 persons in different parts of the country. Several others have been hospitalised as the nation continues to face a crisis of electricity supply. There seems to be no end in sight to the embarrassing problem of generator deaths. It is so sad.

On December 30, 2008, at Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Council in Imo State, twelve persons were suffocated overnight in one family after inhaling carbon monoxide fumes from a standby generator set. Four survivors were found in a state of coma when anxious villagers broke into the house. It was noticed that no member of the unfortunate family came out in the morning to do the usual chores. Neighbours said the family left their power generating set on because there was no public power supply. The result was that the entire family died and was given mass burial by the community.

Six days after, another disaster occurred at Ihongbe in Oredo Local Government Council in Edo State. A community leader, one Michael Aiwekhae died along with his wife and four children from generator fumes. The dead reportedly included Efosa, a Youth Corps member who graduated from the University of Benin. One Eric managed to survive and was rushed to the hospital by neighbours.

Earlier on in July 2008, generator fumes also killed 17 people from the same kindred at Isiala-Ngwa in Abia State who reportedly gathered to observe a vigil of prayers to ward off evil spirits purportedly haunting a member of the family. One survivor, Linus Abba, reported hearing strange noises and noticed that the room was filled with smoke. That was all he could remember as he fainted. The gory sight of dead men, women and children evoked anger and disgust in the entire community. Government officials later visited the scene of the disaster. But nothing concrete came out of this other than widespread speculation that the deaths could be attributed to evil spirits.

Not quite long ago also, a family of ten reportedly perished in Ibadan due to generator fumes they inhaled while asleep at night. A legislator was burnt to death in Kano while trying to refuel his generator which suddenly exploded. And in Lagos, a Customs Officer, Mr. Benedict Ibe and his wife, Catherine were also suffocated to death by toxic generator fumes.

The catalogue of deaths involving generator fumes across the country is endless and alarming. Homes have been razed by fire sparked off by generators. Properties worth millions of naira have been destroyed and severe burns suffered from generators have incapacitated several people. Given our extended family system, survivors of the dead, some of who were breadwinners for their families are in perpetual anguish, pain and misery. Nothing is being done by the society or government to bring succour to such persons.

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There is no doubt that the problematic electricity supply situation is wrecking havoc in the country. Since power supply became epileptic, with many parts of the country in perpetual darkness, generators have become popular. They have also become a serious threat to public health. Nigerians are dying silently daily, from the effect of debilitating noise and dangerous fumes emanating from countless generators in use.

In a country of about 140 million people without electricity, many are forced to resort to the use of generators as the only source of power supply. In this regard, an estimated 70 million households are using generator sets to provide electricity. The noise and poisonous fumes emanating from the machines is a major health hazard. But government is not showing enough concern.

While Nigerians are hoping that the electricity situation would improve, reports that the National Assembly approved a budget of N2 billion to fuel and service generators belonging to government ministries, departments and agencies is disheartening. It clearly shows that a solution to the problem of electricity is not yet in the horizon.

It is also frustrating that the Yar'Adua administration has failed to declare the state of emergency it promised more than 20 months ago. Government is dragging its feet and has failed to take decisive action. At the moment, power generation is around 1,500 MW and this is abysmally low. It is a terrible situation.

With Nigerians forced to seek alternative means of power supply, and paying such a huge price in doing so, the challenge now is for government to embark on a massive public enlightenment campaign to educate the people about how best to use generators without endangering their lives. The media, and other groups in civil society can also assist in this regard. Generators should be kept in well-ventilated spaces, not in closed spaces, while in use. The sets should also be maintained regularly. But in the long run, Nigerians deserve a lot better than this; they deserve to enjoy a regular supply of electricity.

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