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Tuesday, January 26, 2010

Mystery fire in Gombe...*From Chucks Collins, Onitsha and Auwal Ahmad, Gombe*

* Man, wife, son die and Onitsha Timber Market burns

THEY arrived as early as possible to resume their business transactions as usual, only to be greeted with wisp of ashes at the site of what was once their thriving timber market. No thanks to the early morning Sunday fire, which turned their source of livelihood into ashes in a twinkling of an eye, at the Onitsha Bridge-head Timber Market, Anambra State.

Also in Gombe last week, a more tragic event occurred. An entire family of three, a man, his wife and their young son, perished in a mysterious fire, from which the neighbours are yet to recover.

When Onitsha Timber Market traders rounded off their activities on Saturday night and bade farewell to one another, none of them suspected that disaster was lurking behind.

But a dawn inferno shattered the silent night, licking up the multi-billion-naira timber market while property worth millions of naira was destroyed. Thank God, no life was lost though five people sustained various degrees of injuries..

The immediate cause of the inferno could not be ascertained but on Sunday morning, traders suspected electrical fault.

When The Guardian got to the scene on Sunday morning, many of traders were weeping over their losses while some were combing the site to see if they could retrieve anything.

The Sunday incident was the third fire disaster in the market in the past three years.

An eyewitness, Prince Uba told The Guardian the disaster started at about 4.00 a.m. on Sunday on everybody was asleep.

"We noticed flames of fire from a section of the market and before we could rush to the place, there was an explosion. Within a few minutes, the entire surrounding was engulfed by fire.

"There was nothing we could do than to scamper for safety and started calling the shop owners to inform them of the inferno," he said.

According to him, they could not know the immediate cause of the fire but suspected electrical gadget being left on or power surge.

Conflicting statements from some of the security agents around did not suggest if there was power outage or not, at the time the fire started.

A sympathizer at the scene, Chidi Ugwu, said what made the situation so severe and the entire property razed was because the shop owners were not around, except the vigilance group.

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According to him, "All the traders had gone home on Saturday, hoping to come back on Monday to resume their business. We only have a few people that operate on Sunday and when the fire started, there was actually nobody around. Inflammable items, including dried woods, planks, sawdust, combustible chemicals, diesels and machinery also boosted the fire.

The Chairman of the Onitsha Joint Traders Wood Workers Association, Chief Patrick Akputa bemoaned the incident, sympathising with his colleagues who lost property worth millions of naira in the inferno.

He thanked God that no life was lost but lamented the damages to property, which he could not evaluate.

Akputa said it was the vigilance group that alerted him of the fire in the early hours of the day.

He added that all efforts to reach the state fire services station at the Main Market and Okpoko failed.

According to him, since the fire service station at Asaba, Delta State could not respond to their distress call, it had to call Nnewi Station, saying the entire market had been razed before the arrival of Nnewi Fire Service Station.

Akputa estimated the loss at a billion naira.

However, some of the affected families whose sources of livelihood depended solely on the proceeds from the market bewailed their losses.

One of them, Emma Nwoke, continuously breathed heavily as he stood beside what was once his shop.

"This is the beginning of a new journey. Where do I start from?" he bemoaned.

Another victim, Silas Okoro lamented the fire razed goods worth over N50 million in his shop.

"I received call at about 5.00 a.m. that the market was on fire. I rushed out of home immediately and by the time I got here, the heat of the fire was so much that I could not attempt anything," he said.

The victims also expressed concern over the perennial problems of fire in the market.

According to them, Governor, Peter Obi donated five million to the traders when it happened the previous year, adding that what they need are not donations and visits from politicians but a fire station to curb the spate of fire in the market.

However, many politicians in the state, including Prof. Chukwuma Soludo and Senator Emma Anosike commiserated with the victims.

While lamenting that part of the wealth of the state lies in the market, Soludo called for fire station and other necessary fire prevention gadgets as matter of urgency and donated N2 million to the victims.

In Gombe, it was gathered that the fire broke out at about 9.45 p.m. in the night at the Federal Low-cost area of Gombe metropolis where the couple had lived for over a year.

Though the source remains unknown, sympathizers had wondered if it might not be as a result of excessively high voltage from Power Holding Company of Nigeria.

According to an eyewitness, the victims, Mr. Femi Balogun, 42, his wife, Adenike, 33, and their five -year -old son, Martins could not be rescued because of the many security installations in the apartment.

"In the confusion that followed the fire, the family could not remember where the keys to the metal barriers were kept.

"The neighbours were outside shouting encouragement and advice, making strenuous efforts to break down the security gadgets installed to keep out intruders but to no avail.

" The family was too confused to help themselves and so perished in the fire," an eyewitness told The Guardian.

But their next-door neighbours were luckier as though they lost everything in the house to the fire, no one in the family died.

The landlady's, Joel James Radakson, told The Guardian, he became aware of the fire tat about 9.45p.m. when suddenly, there was so much noise and confusion and people began shouting as thick smoke billowed out of the victims' flat.

He said, in just a few moments, their apartment was covered in thick cloud of smoke.

He lamented that despite the efforts by several people from the area to, the victims were trapped in their apartment until they were burnt to death.

Last week's fire would be the third in Gombe metropolis.

The first was in 2007, another in the same GRA area, in 2008.

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