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Tuesday, February 16, 2010

Death at Slaughter Bus Stop

- In Port Harcourt, PHCN cables fall during morning rain, electrocute many

From Kelvin Ebiri & Roseanne Chikereuba, Port Harcourt

THE woman and her children were a familiar sight at Slaughter Bus Stop, Oginigba in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital, where she sold food.

Her customers were the drivers and conductors of the numerous commercial buses and their passengers.

Last Saturday was school-free and three of the children were helping their mother attend to customers, when the tragedy that claimed their lives as well as the lives of nine others, struck.

There had been a heavy rain early that morning and commuters as usual were disembarking from and boarding buses to different destinations at Slaughter Bus Stop.

An eyewitness, Victor Briggs told The Guardian that he and several others were standing close to the bus stop at about 7.30am, when suddenly it started to rain.

"Then, what began as a gentle breeze soon gave way to a strong wind.

"Just behind a wall-fence at the bus stop, there was a tree beneath which high tension cables belonging to Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) crossed.

"As the wind blew, the branches of the trees close to the high tension pole were touching the wires.

"Suddenly, there was a spark. The cable cut from the pole and fell on commercial buses and others at the bus stop, including the woman and her children.

"Two buses that had queued up for commuters to board were affected.

Some of the passengers seated in the buses and waiting were electrocuted. One of the buses caught fire.

The two legs of the woman who sold food were severed and she died. So did her three children.

A lady that held an iron rod lost her two hands.

A bus conductor with some money in his hands caught fire immediately and died.

"When, at last, PHCN disconnected power supply to the location, we went and started removing the bodies.

Some had fallen into the gutter. We took away many bodies to the

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government-owned Braithwaite Memorial Hospital (BMH), Port Harcourt mortuary"

Another eyewitness, Miss Margaret Eke said most of the victims were passengers and food and bread hawkers.

According to her: "The woman that _sold food died with three of her children. That day was a Saturday and the kids did not go to school.

Her husband wept bitterly when he came to the scene."

_Lucky to have escaped the tragedy, Miss Chioma Jacob told The Guardian that four persons that sustained severe injuries on their legs were taken to Teme Clinic operated by Doctors Without Borders in the Diobu area of the city.

She said: "What I saw was very shocking. I am even lucky because I would have been a victim. Government should create a parking space for commercial buses in this area. The PHCN should cut off all the trees around their high tension cables."__

An engineer, Cletus Itug, who witnessed the incident observed that the high-tension wire that fell on the victims, perhaps did not have a stay cord, arguing that if the cord were in place, the wire would not have been severed.

"Just look at the size of the wire, it is just about 11,000mm while the other one opposite is 13,000 mm. See how close the tension wire at the opposite direction is to that storey building there. And it ought not be so" he said.

_ When The Guardian visited the scene, shoes, sandals, slippers, drinks, food items, clothes and other wares of the victims littered the spot as hundreds of sympathizers gathered in disbelief. _

_The tree whose branch fell and cut the cable grows in the Zoological Garden, along the dualised road from Trans-Amadi to Abuloma and Amadi-Ama.

Big trees inside the zoological gardens were still competing with the wires._

The _PHCN Borikiri Business District spokesperson, Mr. John Onyi, told The Guardian that the company was investigating the cause of the accident.

He said, "We are still investigating, we are yet to come out with results of investigation. However, PHCN, Port Harcourt Zonal office sincerely apologizes to the public, especially the bereaved families, on what has happened."

He explained that, the management has ordered isolation of the area and other areas affected. According to him,

"We have put the supply out completely to prevent further loss of life and we are investigating the whole matter right away.

In 2005 we carried out a massive campaign against people trading or living under high-tension wires. We did that in 2005/2006 and it is ongoing. We have told people repeatedly that living under high-tension wire is a risky venture."

He continued, "This is a high-tension, we call it a 33kv high-tension line, serving Abuloma/Oginigba and its environs. When the rainstorm started, we had what is called 'a wire-cut'. The wire-cut fell on top of two buses loading under the high tension wire and there followed the electrocution."

When The Guardian contacted the State Police Public Relations Officer, Mrs. Rita Inoma-Abbey (DSP), she confirmed the fatal incident, but put

the death toll at 10.

She said: "The number of those that died is 10, while 12 are unconscious. All of them are now at BMH.

"For now we have barricaded the place and our men are everywhere to prevent people from moving around there so that they will not get hurt. However, we have contacted the PHCN and they are already doing something. They have already come there to remove the wire. Very soon everything will come back to normal."

Following the incident, the Rivers State government called on the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) to conduct a technical investigation to unravel the cause of the incident.

The state governor, Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, who was represented by the Secretary to the State Government Mr Magnus Abe, made the call at the Braithwaite Memorial Hospital when he visited the survivors who receive treatment as a result of the incident.

He confirmed that eight persons died instantly while two of the seriously injured victims gave up at the hospital.

He noted that nine out of the 13 injured persons were receiving treatment at BMH while four were being attended to at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH).

Abe noted that the incident was shocking and that the government quickly mobilized the state emergency medical team and other personnel, to save the situation.

He explained that the need for technical investigation became imperative, for according to him, power supply should have tripped off from the sources as soon as the incident occurred which he said would have reduced the number of casualty and wondered why there wasn't an outage instantly.

While re-iterating the consistent appeal of the state government's position that nobody should live or do any business under high tension lines, he said the state sincerely sympathized with the families of the deceased and other affected persons, adding that government and PHCN were dealing with the incident, and reassured the citizens that the matter was now under control.

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