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13 die as bomb blasts rock PDP rally in Niger

FRIDAY, 04 MARCH 2011 00:00 FROM JOHN OGIGI (MINNA), BETTY ADERIBIGBE (ABUJA) AND GORDI UDEAJAH (UMUAHIA) **NEWS - NATIONAL**



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Poor Best

Orji abandons debate over safety fears



It was a scene of confusion and horror yesterday. Thousands of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) members, thronged the venue of the zonal rally of the party in Niger State. One after the other, the dignitaries trooped in and took their seats at the stand for the PDP leaders.

With the stage set, the National Anthem was being played as the PDP leaders prepared for their speeches, presentation of special activities and the party's flags to its candidates from the zone.

Half way into the rendition of the National Anthem, the unexpected happened: There was a deafening explosion and a stampede. As the scene was being deserted, another blast occurred a few minutes later.

It all started without an inkling. A racing white 18-seater bus appeared, drove menacingly close to the venue at Government Secondary School, Suleja. An object was hurled into the crowd by one of the occupants of the bus, which sped away immediately. The object suspected to be a bomb exploded and there were groaning and rushing into different directions as members ran for safety. After normalcy returned, 10 lifeless bodies were found on the ground with some of them burnt beyond recognition.

Another set of 18 people were in unconscious state while 20 others were seriously injured. As they were rushed to hospitals in Suleja, Minna, the state capital and other neighbouring towns, three of the victims were said to have died.

Men of the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) and the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC), believed to be worst hit in the twin blasts, were taken to the Gwagwalada Specialist Hospital, Abuja.

The identity of those who died in the blasts could not be ascertained at the time of filing this report.

Sources said the first bomb explosion, said to be hand-made, was thrown by an unidentified person from the moving bus when the National Anthem was being rendered. Shortly another bomb went off near where the governor's cars were parked but Governor Babangida Aliyu had been reportedly whisked out of the venue.

At the time of filing this report, no arrest had been made by the police as the State Command's Public Relation Officer, Mr. Richard Ogwuche told reporters that they were on top of the situation and had commenced investigation into the incident.

While commissioning a hospital project in new Bwari shortly after the incident, Aliyu condemned the incident and sympathised with families of the victims.

The spokesman of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Yushau Shuaib, said officials of the agency moved into the venue and evacuated the victims to the hospitals.

The first disruption of a major national event occurred during the Vanguard Newspaper organised seminar on the Niger Delta peace building strategy in Warri, Delta State in March 2010. One person died on the spot and several others were injured. The celebrations of Nigeria's 50th anniversary on October 1, 2010 in Abuja was also almost disrupted when bombs exploded near the venue, killing over a dozen people and injuring several others.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) claimed responsibility for both incidents.

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Another bomb explosion occurred at the Mogadishu Cantonment in Abuja on New Year's eve killing and injuring women and children.

The incident came a few days after a similar attack in Jos, Plateau State on Christmas Eve, killing over 20 people. The bombs exploded in densely populated areas where joyous people in Christmas mood were already at various joints to celebrate the activity. There was also a blast at a PDP rally in Yenagao, Bayelsa State.

The debate for governorship candidates in Abia State organised yesterday by the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) went on without Governor Theodore Orji's participation. He walked out of the Mater Dei Cathedral Conference Centre venue after he was introduced over alleged hostility against him.

Orji said the incident was enough to show the un-seriousness of the event he earlier believed was organised by the Catholic Church to enable the governorship candidates sell their programmes to the public.

The governor said he was compelled to abandon the debate because he was booed by supporters of a rival candidate in the hall when he was introduced to the audience.

When this happened, the governor asked for the microphone to express his disappointment over the instantaneous heckling that greeted his introduction, accusing the organisers of failing to provide a level-playing ground for the debate that attracted five of the 15 governorship candidates.

Holding that the environment was not conducive for him to participate in the debate, he left the venue, urging the organisers to redress it with another suitable venue.

The Catholic Bishop of Umuahia, Rt. Rev. Lucius Ugorji could not make him to change his stance as he left the venue and headed for Aba while his supporters who saw him driving out, turned back. Meanwhile, Orji has urged the people of the state to remain steadfast and vigilant in protecting their hard earned freedom because "the potency of the enemy to destroy cannot be discountenanced.

"This is not the time to relax but to continue to work hard and pray so that we will not be caught up by the forces of darkness such that the rule of one family over all the people can no longer be tolerated. The government has unearthed concerted plans by desperate and scanty oppositions to embarrass the governor at the slightest opportunity with the use of uninformed thugs who have not bothered to ask those making use of their brain where their own children are. It is important to inform people of Abia State that the government is abreast with plans and attempts that will be made towards destabilising governance as well as scuttling the electoral process as the only option by those who think Abia is their private property," he said.

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The insecurity in Nigeria, Jos killings, bomb blasts, armed robbery should send enough signals to our so called leaders that something concrete must be done about the welfare of the masses. Enough of all these promises. If care is not taken, bullet proof, high- wall fences or even Armour tank will not save anybody. Let our leaders learn from happenings in North Africa.

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