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EX-ASUU CHIEF, IYAYI, DIES IN COLLISION WITH WADA'S CONVOY

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- Don loses life in bid to decide strike's suspension
- Jonathan, Mark, Labour, varsity teachers, others mourn

TRAGEDY struck the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) Tuesday as its former President, Prof. Festus Iyayi, died in a motor accident in Kogi State.

The Head of Department of Business Administration, University of Benin (UNIBEN), was said to have died in a crash involving the convoy of Kogi State Governor Idris Wada near Lokoja.

The ASUU-marked vehicle in which he was said to be travelling to Kano State for a national leadership meeting of the association over its four-month strike, along with three of his colleagues, was reportedly hit by a police escort vehicle attached to the governor's convoy. This forced Iyayi's vehicle to somersault three times.

The condition of Iyayi's three other colleagues was said to be critical at press time yesterday.

Iyayi had been part of ASUU's negotiating team with the Federal Government over the former's strike and they were said to be travelling to Kano in continuation of efforts to resolve the dispute.

He recently told The Guardian that ASUU would not be blackmailed into agreeing to suspend the strike until all their demands were met. His death yesterday threw ASUU and the University of Benin community into shock.

Prof. Friday Okonofua of the University of Benin accused Wada of being responsible for his death.

"It is the governor of Kogi that killed him. He was killed by a reckless convoy. He killed one of our most distinguished academics who has won laurels all over the world. We would hold the governor of Kogi responsible for his death," Okonofua said.

At the time of filing this report, it was learnt that an ambulance had been dispatched from Benin to Kogi State to convey Iyayi's body to Benin.

President Goodluck Jonathan described the death as a rude shock not only to the academic community, but to the entire country, given his immense contributions to the advancement of knowledge.

In a statement by his Spokesman, Dr. Reuben Abati, Jonathan commiserated with the leadership and members of the ASUU on the tragic death.

According to the statement, "President Jonathan also extends sincere condolences to Dr. Iyayi's family as well as his colleagues, friends and associates across the country and beyond.

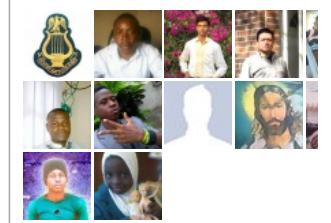
"The President joins them in mourning the renowned academic and award-winning writer who rose to national prominence in the 1980s with his courageous leadership of ASUU in its struggle for a better working environment for teachers and academics in the nation's university system.

"He is particularly dismayed by the fact that Dr. Iyayi has sadly lost his life while going to contribute to efforts to finally resolve the current ASUU strike which has unfortunately disrupted academics in most of the nation's universities for over four

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months.”

Senate President David Mark noted the giant strides of the university scholar which brought international fame and value to the nation.

According to Mark: “This is one very painful death. Dr. Iyayi was among the university lecturers meeting with the Federal Government on how to end this strike. As usual, his contributions have been forthright and rewarding. That he died at this time when his contributions are most needed, is a huge setback.

“I remember his frank and honest contributions towards ending the strike and addressing the ills in the tertiary education in Nigeria when we met last week. His death is unfortunate. It is a huge loss to the nation.”

Labour leaders blamed his death on what they described as a “crisis of governance” in the country. The Vice President of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Issa Aremu, noted in a statement: “We received with heavy heart this afternoon the death of a comrade, Dr. Festus Iyayi, one-time President of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) reportedly in a ghastly motor accident involving the convoy of the Governor of Kogi State.”

According to him, “Nigeria labour movement has indeed lost a tested and committed activist of decent work in the universities and Nigerian labour market in general.”

He added that “the late Dr. Iyayi would be remembered for the honesty, and commitment as well as abundant energy he brought to the struggle of working men and women for improved working and living conditions.

“The death of Dr. Iyayi is a sobering and cruel reminder to the Federal Government to urgently put a permanent end to the persistent crisis of funding public education in general and university education in particular. Lecturers, including the late Festus, as well as students, should be on the campuses not on bad roads, if not for the recent avoidable crisis,” he said.

In a statement by its President, Dr. Joe Okei-Odumakin, the Campaign for Democracy said Iyayi was a dependable ally, a dogged fighter and an iconic figure who was ever loyal to common causes.

Activists, under the aegis of Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA/FoEN), said Iyayi’s death was a loss to the human rights community and the nation at large.

In a statement, Executive Director, EERA/FoEN, Dr. Godwin Ojo, said Iyayi would be greatly remembered as a dogged fighter for the cause of humanity, and his love for education. He added that he was part of ERA/FoEN’s most dependable intellectual base in the struggle for eco-justice and protection of local livelihoods.

Others, who also mourned yesterday, were the National Chairman of the Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP), Chibuzo Asomugha; Chairman of the University of Lagos Chapter of ASUU, Oghenekaro Ogbinaka; Executive Director, Civil Society Legislative Advocacy (CISLAC), Auwal Ibrahim Musa; President, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Prof. Remi Raji-Oyelade; the 2013 winner of the Nigeria Prize for Literature, Tade Ipadeola and another author and organiser of Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa, Ogochukwu Promise.

Calls to the phone lines of ASUU President, Nasir Fagge, were unanswered at the time of this report. He also did not respond to the text message sent to him.

Iyayi, whose strong Marxist views of freeing the suffering masses from exploitation from the ruling class, form the core of his artistic vision in the four novels he wrote – The Contract, Violence, Heroes and Awaiting Court Martial. He won the Commonwealth Prize for Literature for his classic novel, Heroes in 1988.

In his heyday as president of ASUU at the University of Benin, Iyayi had collision with then first female Vice Chancellor in Nigeria, Prof. Grace Alele-Williams. This led to his arrest and detention for several months. It also kept him out of the university system for a few years before he returned to his post after the era of Alele-Williams.

Born in Ugbejun, Ishan, Edo State in 1947, he left Nigeria in 1968 to pursue higher education, and obtained a Master’s degree in Industrial Economics from Kiev Institute of Economics, in the former USSR, and then his Ph.D from the University of Bradford, England.

He had since been a consistent critical voice in Nigeria’s socio-political affairs.

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