
Wailings, blame trade as rescue workers dig into rubble of collapsed building

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Some of the survivors rescued from the scene PHOTO: BBC

The wailing was as intense as the surging crowd in their hundreds that stood sentry as emergency workers, health officials and willing ‘Good Samaritans’ poured over the debris of the collapsed building at Massey Street, Ita-faji in Lagos Island.

The dusty dry air could be felt all around with emotions and mood swinging from anxiety to relief and back to depression. As the combined efforts of rescuers manage to evacuate survivors trapped in the building, it was shouts of hurray for lucky survivors mixed with more wailing from expectant onlookers whose relatives were still trapped in the rubbles.

From the crowd, a group of people were struggling to hold down an inconsolable woman, whose four children were pupils of Oheny Nursery and Primary School, which was on the second floor of the building. As at press time, only one of her kids had been retrieved dead, sinking her hopes of the others coming out alive.

It was different strokes for another woman as her two children attending the school were brought out alive and immediately whisked to the hospital. But it was hard work for the rescue workers who were despite the shoving and pulling from the crowd of untrained bystanders, used the available tools and sometimes bare hands to break into the rubble.



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It was a difficult terrain, the three-storey building harboured a school of over 200 pupils, residential flats, daycare centre and lock-up shops. The headmistress of the school, one Aunty Esther, was trapped and has been confirmed dead at the general hospital. She was rescued though with some injuries and rushed to the hospital but passed on moments later.

A parent of one of the pupils, simply identified as Alfa, said: “I was bathing when my daughter left for school. She attends this school. It was not more than five minutes after I heard a loud sound. I quickly washed the soap off my face and ran out of the bathroom to the scene. At that time, the entire building had not gone down. Luckily, my daughter was removed 10 minutes after. She was on the stairs when the building collapsed. Early rescuers saw her hands and successfully pulled her out.”

Ayinke Busari, a friend to a parent at the school, said she is there in place of her friend, Taiwo, who had been taken home to take care of her baby. “She has seven children in the school, two have been found but they are yet to locate the remaining ones. We have sent her home because she has a baby,” Busari said.

Wale, a resident said the building was converted from a low-cost house to a three-storey building. He added that the building was given to a developer who reconstructed it in 2016. Another eyewitness said: “The building has been showing signs of collapse for over two weeks. Occupants have been writing letters to the state government but nothing was done about it. In fact, it took it upon myself to confront the landlord but he was so nonchalant about it since he inherited the property from his parents. See what he has caused now. Unfortunately, he and his family have escaped from the scene and ran away. My step-daughter was also trapped there but has been rescued and is now at the hospital.”

Another said: “We called the headmistress of the school, Aunty Esther, this morning that the walls of the building is cracking and that the children should be released to go home, but she insisted that the children would remain in school and that by weekend the walls will be patched.”

A resident who identified herself simply as Shekinah, said she never knew there was a school in the collapsed building because the government had marked the building more than three times. “Government has marked it several times but they’ll only patch it and put tiles after bribing the officials,” another woman who declined to say her name added.

As rescue operations wore on, residents still trapped were making frenetic calls to their loved ones of their position below the rubble and calling for help. Some members of the Red Cross passed oxygen through a narrow way to some of them, though it was insufficient for them.

Residents however slammed the rescue workers of being slow in recovering victims from the rubble. Some of them said before the team arrived, they had rescued a number



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of the victims hoping that with the emergency agency's expertise, the situation would get better. They added that the team has however not been able to rescue as many as they had expected.

"Before this people came, boys in the area had rescued some people. So when they came, we expected them to have brought out more people but that is not the case. It's been a while they brought out anybody. Now they are saying once it is 7:00p.m. they will leave. Are they here to help us or what?" Ganiyu Abolaji asked.

Bode, reacting to the rescue team's alleged snail speed, said: "They feel we can't help after all we have been bringing out people before they came. There are those who have idea where to locate more people but they are chasing us away."

Speaking on the development, general manager of the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA), Tiamiu Adesina, said: "We were told that over a 100 pupils were trapped but I think it was just a screaming figure. Based on the number of persons we have pulled out and the lessening wailing from concerned family members, they are not up to that figure."

The crowd got agitated upon the arrival of the governor, Akinwunmi Ambode, who was pelted with sachet water and bottled water before calm was restored to the scene. Many were angry with his presence as they blamed the inactions of government for the tragedy, saying he has done nothing about the distressed buildings in the area and no stringent supervision on the activities of developers. Others blamed the collapse on the owner of the building who used inferior materials for reconstruction.

The governor said the tragedy was unfortunate and "from what we have observed here and the briefings I have received, we already have almost about two floors sunk into the ground. The first observation is that this is an old building and it is only the penthouse and the other floors that we have been able to reach to rescue people. So far, we have rescued 41 people and 12 already dead.

"Our response units are here; we are getting additional cranes to be able to go deeper than where we are now to rescue more lives. I just want to appeal to people that we should give the rescue workers the chance to save more lives. Sooner, the beehive of activities shifted to the hospitals, Odan General Hospital, Lagos Island Maternity, Onikan Health Centre, Onikan Mercy Hospital, as parents and relatives trooped to the facilities to know the fate of their loved ones.



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