

News Analysis

Stampedes:

How not to cater for poor masses, share largesse

Driven to desperation by systemic and multi-dimensional poverty and the gross incompetence of operatives entrusted with their safety, the recent death of 87 people as a result of a stampede following the distribution of palliatives and gifts nationwide has rekindled the lax emergency and crowd control strategies in the country. **BERTRAM NWANNEKANMA** writes that the recurrence of such incidents despite repeated ugly experiences amounts to criminal negligence on the part of the authorities.



Congregants during December 21, 2024, stampede in Abuja

THE Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Maitama, Abuja, was a peaceful sanctuary where congregants praised, worshipped God, and looked up to him for his wondrous provisions until the tragic incident of December 21, 2024, unsettled the place.

By the last count, 10 lives, including children were lost in a stampede as over 3,000 people poured into the facility jostling for palliatives.

According to witnesses, a crowd surge at one of the church gates triggered the stampede as dozens tried to enter the premises at about 4:00 a.m., hours before the palliatives were due to be shared.

Some, including the elderly waited overnight to get food, said Loveth Inyang, who rescued one baby from the stampede.

Miles away in Okija, Anambra State, 12 people were sent to their early graves, and 32 others were injured during a scramble for rice distributed by a philanthropist on the same day.

Two days earlier, on December 19, 2024, 35 children were crushed to death at a Christmas funfair in Ibadan, Oyo State.

The tragedy unfolded as the event began at Islamic High School, in the Basorun area of the state capital.

These stampedes prompted growing calls for authorities to enforce safety measures at events, where large crowds are expected to gather.

In the wake of these incidents, the Nigerian Police Force also mandated that organisers of such events obtain prior permission since crowd control, though an essential aspect of event management is often overlooked in the country.

The absence of a crowd control policy increases the risk of holding large gatherings, and regrettably, the country is paying dearly for it. In other climes, national and local crowd control policies, stipulating techniques and strategies to manage and direct large groups of people are in place.

For instance, when 96 fans of Liverpool Football Club died in a 1989 FA Cup semi-final match against Nottingham Forest, it took 28 years to find the culprits. Within that period, the investigation did not cease and the victims' families did not lose hope.

Initially, drunken fans were blamed for the deaths. However, it was eventually established that poor crowd management in an overcrowded, fenced-in enclosure at the Hillsborough Stadium was at fault. Police chief, David Duckenfield, was held responsible 28 years later for "failure to discharge his responsibility."

Right now, in the United Kingdom, crowd trouble leading to death is no longer a regular occurrence.

However, that is not the case in the country as over 105 lives have been lost in stampedes during food and cash distribution events in Nigeria in the last two years.

In February 2024, seven were killed in a Lagos stampede, while struggling to buy confiscated rice sold by the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) to the public as an intervention in economic hardship and hunger.

In April 2024, nine people died in Sokoto at the residence of former governor Alfiyu Wamakko during a chaotic palliative distribution.

Similarly, in March 2024, seven people, including an eight-year-old girl lost their lives at a charity event in Bauchi where N5,000 cash gifts were distributed.

Days earlier, two students died and 23 were injured during a state government-organised palliative distribution at Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

The grim pattern dates back to May 22, 2022, when 30 people died in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, at a church charity event marred by overcrowding.

One of the most tragic and scandalous cases of poor crowd management was recorded at the National Stadium, Surulere, Lagos, in 1978, during which about 24 people died after a Challenge Cup semi-final match between Shooting Stars of Ibadan, and Bendel Insurance of Benin.

Strangely, the facility managers turned off the floodlights immediately after the match, which was played at night, triggering a rush for the numerous exit points.

Unfortunately, some of these entrances/exit points were firmly locked and when people got there, they could no longer turn back as the crowd kept pressing them against the iron steel gates. Those who fell were trampled to death.

to show that no lessons were learnt, years later, in 2017 when the Super Eagles moved their World Cup qualifier against Zambia to the newly-built Akwa Ibom Stadium, in Uyo, the state capital, there was another crowd trouble, which the number of people feared dead and those injured were disputed.

Under President Goodluck Jonathan, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) organised an interview to recruit 4,556 new hands, but about 19 Nigerian job seekers ended up losing their lives.

In what was adjudged by many as one of the most audacious and exploitative ventures, about 520,000 applicants from all over the country were crammed into stadiums nationwide with each of them charged N1,000. The deaths occurred due to stampedes.

In the political sphere, in March 2019, during former President Muhammadu Buhari's electioneering in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 14 people reportedly died from a stampede.

On February 7, 2019, five people also lost their lives because of a stampede at the 37,000-capacity Jolly Niyame Stadium, in Jalingo, Taraba State, during Buhari's reelection rally in the state.

In Kano, when the presidential candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, visited, it was by sheer providence that death was averted after nine people slumped, following another uncontrollable crowd turnout.

Despite these incidents that have claimed innocent lives in the country, event organisers have furthered the ugly trend during sporting and religious events, as well as, political rallies where huge crowds are holed into enclosures without adequate consideration for their safety.

Pitiably after each round of the tragedy, everyone returns home to await a future re-enactment of the calamity.

Human Rights lawyer, Femi Falana decried the loss of over 105 lives in stampedes in the last two years during food and cash distribution events in Nigeria, attributing the tragedies to "poverty-induced neoliberal economic policies" and "criminal negligence." He criticised the elite for their treatment of the poor during such events.

"No member of the elite invites others to lunch by throwing the food," he remarked, condemning what he described as "class prejudice" in humanitarian aid distribution.

Falana, who identified the remote cause of such stampedes as poverty and immediate cause as security, said it is the responsibility of the government to protect lives and property irrespective of whether they were informed, or not.

According to him, Section 3, subsection 4 of the Police Establishment Act 2020 provides that the police shall provide adequate security in a public place, like all these ones we are talking about.

The police, he said, are supposed to be there to prevent hoodlums who want to take over, because it's a constitutional right.

"However, the same government that will say oh, it's the right of the people to have protests would set the police and army against

them. . . People must be treated equally in the country. But what I am seeing is the government trying to shift attention from its primary responsibility of defending the people, or providing security for the people all the time."

He also said that attempts to blame organisers of these events constitute a diversionary ploy as the government cannot appear to be washing its hands off the menace.

"These tragic events are a national shame. The victims were not just statistics, but human beings driven to desperation by systemic poverty and the gross incompetence of those entrusted with their safety."

He stressed that a group, which he chairs, the Alliance on Surviving COVID-19 and Beyond (ASCAB), will mobilise lawyers to pursue civil suits against organisers of these events.

"We will ensure survivors and families of the deceased are adequately compensated," Falana said. "Those responsible for these avoidable tragedies must be held accountable. . . The loss of these innocent lives is heart-wrenching, and it underscores the indignity that poverty imposes on our people."

A safety expert and a retired Director of Public Safety and Wellbeing, Lagos State Safety Commission, Adeyinka Adebisi, said that the government should as a matter of urgency, formulate policy on crowd control.

According to him, the policy should include inter alia; the number of guests or participants per square metre, trained and certified safety personnel on the ground to enforce the number of people, as well as, continuous relaying of safety moments, at least every 20 minutes.

To avert future deaths arising from stampedes, he said there is a need for a pre-event Safety Risk Assessment, during the event proper and post-event.

He stressed that safety professionals are the ones who would carry out, or conduct comprehensive safety risk assessments of event places to identify hazards, and advice for proactive activities, particularly, exits, signages, muster points, fire exits, fire extinguishers, etc.

"Similarly, the safety person would serve as the emergency first responder at the event. During the event, once the number of people in the space is filled up, no one should be allowed into the space any longer. . . The health and safety personnel has a job to do before, during, and after the event, however, other security agents (military and paramilitary) need to secure the event venue by ensuring intruders who may want to breach the peace of the event, they must also ensure "no parking" signs for guests, ensure that emergency exits are not blocked for free flow of both human traffic and vehicular activities.

Also, a certified security expert, Mathew Ibadin, said that stampedes highlight significant shortcomings in the nation's emergency and crowd management strategies.

The failure to anticipate the potential for overcrowding and chaos during the distribution process indicates a critical oversight in risk assessment and preparedness, he noted.

"These stampedes resulting in casualties are reminiscent of similar incidents that occurred during the distribution of COVID-19 palliatives in various parts of the country. They reflect a recurring pattern of inadequate crowd control measures and logistical planning, indicating systemic weaknesses in Nigeria's emergency response mechanisms."

"The failure to learn from past mistakes and implement corrective measures suggests a fundamental flaw in the nation's approach to crisis management."

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