

700 Die In Lagos Pipeline Fire

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This year's Boxing Day turned out bleak for some residents of Lagos State, when fire from a pipeline explosion claimed no fewer than 700 lives and injured well over 100 others.

The incident began around 8.30 a.m. on Segun Akintola Street at Awori Bus Stop on the Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway.

A church, mosque, plank market as well as motor mechanic workshops, liquor shops and plastic grinding shops were razed by the inferno.

Various versions of stories

• Obasanjo Mourns Victims

Probe Agbroko's Death, Aturu Tells Police – A6

were given as being responsible for the incident.

One source said the fire was an act of sabotage and indicted officials of the Ni-

gerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), who often visited the scene with equipment and tankers late at night to scoop fuel, accompa-

nied by armed security agents.

Another blamed the explosion on 'Area Boys' who

Continued on A2

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Continued from A1

had besieged the area in the last two weeks to scoop fuel from burst pipelines.

When fuel scarcity hit the country a few days ago, the illegal business boomed, which attracted additional social miscreants from other parts of Lagos, such as Obalende, Ebute-Metta, and Ikeja.

The native *Area Boys* resisted the invasion with a fight. Policemen sent in to disperse them were beaten up and stoned.

On Tuesday, an argument ensued between the parties over the control of the fuel scoop site. An *Area Boy* smoking cigarette at the scene allegedly caused the fire outbreak.

But the Chairman of Ojokoro Area Development Council, Morufu Adefolabi, countered that a spark from the exhaust pipe of a molue bus loaded with jerry cans used to convey stolen fuel triggered the fire.

A witness who claimed to have lost three relations recounted that the fire started when one of the ring leaders of the vandals was answering a call from his mobile phone.

One of those who died stealing petrol was quoted to have warned policemen that they should be left alone "to take their own portion of the

national cake and Christmas gift."

Another source said the fire that ignited the scene of the incident came from one of the *Area Boys* who was smoking Indian.

He said NUPENG officials who were present when the fire started stood about 500 metres away watching the urchins scoop fuel from the vandalised pipeline.

Policemen believed to have lost their lives in the incident were said to have been extorting money from the *Area Boys*. He put police casualty at 50.

At the scene of the incident, where a combined team of fire fighters of the state government, the NNPC and Julius Berger battled for hours to put out the fire, hundreds of burnt remains were scattered, including that of a woman with a baby strapped to her back.

NNPC Group Managing Director, Funso Kupolokun, who sounded helpless over the activities of vandals in the area, told journalists at the scene of the incident that the management is aware of the activities of pipeline vandals in the state, and has directed the police to intensify security patrol.

"But the police cannot secure the entire length of the pipeline for 24 hours. It is the business of everybody to

fight the menace," he lamented.

Kupolokun said although the distribution of products through the Atlas Cove-Mosimi pipeline - which was disrupted in a recent fire incident at Ijedodo community - was restored with the pumping of about five million litres of fuel on the eve of Christmas after more than two weeks, the fuel supply problem in Lagos would linger for a while.

He explained that it would take at least three days to effect repairs on the vandalised pipeline before pumping of products is restored.

Fuel distribution in Lagos, Ibadan and Abeokuta would be rationed during the emergency period.

Police Commissioner, Emmanuel Adebayo, who visited the scene around 11.00 a.m., confirmed that he had received a call from community leaders that some people were scooping fuel from the pipelines and had ordered the deployment of policemen to the place.

Meanwhile, Lagos State Governor, Bola Tinubu, has blamed NNPC and the federal government for the incident. He said the development was shame-

ful and was a direct result of poverty, unemployment and poor governance.

He said it will be difficult to replace the precious lives lost in the process.

His commissioner for Education, Leke Pitan, sought the co-operation of the community to enable rescue workers perform their duties.

Femi Okeosehintola, a representative of the Lagos State Emergency Services, put the number of the dead at 200 and the injured at 45.

President Olusegun Obasanjo has lamented the loss of lives and urged Nigerians to help avert such tragedies by promptly reporting the activities of vandals to the authorities.

A statement he issued through his spokesperson, Oluremi Oyo, said he is distraught that the tragedy occurred despite repeated warnings by the government against vandalism of oil pipelines and the dangers of scooping spilled products from them.

He called on the vandals to find better and legitimate means of livelihood and implored "all Nigerians to do their patriotic duty by immediately reporting any such incidents that come to their attention before they culminate in another tragedy such as the one that has just occurred in Lagos."